

San Joaquin County

Comprehensive Early Learning & Care Strategic Plan

2026 - 2031



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Introduction

A Shared Vision for Early Learning and Care in San Joaquin County

A Day in San Joaquin County

It is just after 7:30 a.m. when Mateo arrives at his early learning program with his mother. Mateo is four years old. At home, his family speaks both Spanish and English. Mateo is excited to share a story he read the night before with his parents.

Mateo's mother greets another caregiver. They met a few months ago when Mateo's family moved across the county. They introduced themselves while filling out their simple enrollment forms and learning about programs that could support Mateo.

Inside the classroom, Mateo joins a small group of children building towers with blocks. His teacher, who has worked at this early learning program for seven years, sits beside him and asks questions that help him think and learn. When the tower falls, she helps him stay calm and try again. Later that day, Mateo eats a healthy lunch, plays outside with friends on the new playstructure, and practices talking through problems with his classmates. His teacher shares ideas with Mateo's family that they can use at home to support his English language development. The email includes links to a collection of resources and ends with a survey for his family to provide their suggestions back to his teacher. Mateo gets home and is already excited for school tomorrow.

This experience—safe, caring, and supportive—is what early learning and care can look like when programs work well together.

However, in San Joaquin County, not every child or family has access to experiences like Mateo's.

Why Early Learning and Care Matters—Now

The early years of life—from before birth through age twelve—are a time of fast growth. During these years, children learn how to talk, listen, manage emotions, and solve problems. These early skills affect how children learn, stay healthy, and succeed later in life.

Families, caregivers, and early learning providers all play important roles in this growth. The systems that support them matter.

In San Joaquin County, children and families bring many strengths. The San Joaquin County Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment (Phase 1 of this work) affirmed the deep commitment families have to their children's learning and well-being, as well as the dedication of early learning and care providers across the county.¹ At the same time, the Needs Assessment showed that many families face financial pressure, housing challenges, and health concerns. About half of children under age five come from families where more than one language is spoken. Many families work hard to meet basic needs while trying to find the right programs for their children.

For some children, early childhood includes additional challenges, such as unstable housing, family stress, or unmet health and developmental needs. The Needs Assessment found that childcare providers are already serving children with increasingly complex needs, often acting as trusted connectors to broader supports.² These realities make strong, coordinated early learning systems especially important before children enter kindergarten, when early intervention can have the greatest impact.

The Early Learning and Care Strategic Plan represents the next phase of this work. Building directly on the Needs Assessment, the plan supports and strengthens this shared commitment by focusing on early language development, family engagement, and strong transitions between early learning programs and elementary schools. By aligning early learning efforts across systems, San Joaquin County can improve outcomes for children across the full learning continuum.

What the Data Tell Us

Findings from the San Joaquin County Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment show the importance of strong early learning and care for early childhood as well as later in school.³

¹ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): SJCOE worked with Applied Survey Research (ASR), ECE partners and community members to complete the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Needs Assessment of San Joaquin County's ELC landscape. This includes county data, surveys and focus groups with families and providers, and interviews with county and school district ECE leaders.

² [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Page 80 - Figure 139, Page 71 - Figure 121.

³ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Page 55 - From The Field: Community Perspectives.

Today, about one out of three San Joaquin County third grade students meets state standards in reading and math.^{4, 5} Across California, the numbers are higher. About 44% of third graders meet standards in reading, and 46% in math.^{4, 5}

These differences matter. They mean that many children in San Joaquin County reach upper elementary school already behind. If San Joaquin County's third-grade results matched the state average, about 1,000 more students would be reading and doing math at grade level.

The Needs Assessment makes it clear that these results do not start in third grade. They begin much earlier. Children do better in school when they have:⁶

- **Strong language experiences**
Talking, reading, and storytelling at home and in early learning settings
- **Early reading and math activities**
Safe, consistent places to learn, play, and grow
- **Caring, steady adults**
Trusted caregivers and teachers who build strong relationships
- **Early health and development checks**
Screenings and support when children need them
- **Stable family support**
Help with basic needs like housing, food, and health care

When these supports are missing early on, learning differences often grow over time.

A Workforce and System Under Pressure

Early learning programs depend on skilled and caring educators. In San Joaquin County, many early childhood educators earn lower pay than workers in similar jobs. This makes it hard for programs to keep staff.

Providers say they need better pay, more training, and clear career paths to keep a strong and stable workforce.

Families also face challenges when programs do not work well together. Many systems track enrollment, attendance, and child progress, but they are spread across different agencies. This makes it hard for families to move between programs or find the specific help they need.

⁴ [California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress \(CAASPP\), Grade 3 English Language Arts and Mathematics results](#), 2024–25 school year; San Joaquin County compared with statewide results.

⁵ [CSCC County Self Assessment](#): A comprehensive review of San Joaquin County's child abuse prevention efforts to determine the effectiveness of current practice, programs, and services and identify areas for targeted system improvement.

⁶ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 57-59, 69, 73-74, 79 - Figures 100-101, 119, 125, 136.

Families feel this when they fill out many forms, apply to multiple programs, or are unsure where to turn for support.

Grounded in Community Voice

This strategic plan is based on both data and community input.

Families, caregivers, educators, and community partners shared their ideas through surveys, meetings, and group discussions. Parents talked about wanting clear information and welcoming programs. Providers expressed both the joys of their work and the challenges they faced.

Across these conversations, people agreed on one thing: improving early learning and care takes teamwork and alignment across programs, organizations, and communities. To reflect these collective experiences, this plan includes a child-centered vignette that weaves in real stories through the perspectives of a child painting the blue sky experience of [Mateo](#). This story reflects real experiences shared by families and providers, with the names and details thoughtfully combined to honor privacy.

Guiding Principles

This plan is guided by common values that reflect what matters most to San Joaquin County families and providers. **Community First** means listening to families, educators, and caregivers and using their ideas to shape early learning experiences. **Educational Readiness** focuses on helping children build strong early language and literacy skills, along with social-emotional development, communication, independence, and persistence—so they are prepared to succeed in kindergarten and grow as confident readers and learners. **Balanced Engagement** means offering a wide range of programs that meet children’s learning and language needs. **Caregiver Support** recognizes that children do best when their caregivers have clear information, learning opportunities, and flexible options. **Workforce Development** focuses on helping early learning staff improve their skills, build careers, and provide strong learning experiences for children.

About This Strategic Plan

This five-year Early Learning and Care Strategic Plan was created to improve long-term outcomes for children in San Joaquin County. The San Joaquin County Office of Education (SJCOE), the Council for Quality Education and Care of Children (CQECC), Quality Counts San Joaquin, and other community partners will work together to achieve this plan. The Strategic Plan will be used to support the development of quality childcare in San Joaquin County

through community education, collaboration, and advocacy.⁷ It supports aligned decision-making, teamwork, and ongoing improvement across public and private providers, schools, community organizations, and families organized around six important goals and 19 strategies:

Goals	Strategies
Community Leadership and Shared Purpose	1. Elevate families as leaders and partners 2. Strengthen cross-system partnerships and learning networks 3. Center improvement cycles on community voice
System Improvement	4. Provide simple family learning tools 5. Leverage technology to improve access and infrastructure 6. Strengthen program quality, oversight, and transparency
Communication and Navigation	7. Strengthen communication approaches to support engagement in the local context 8. Build shared values and a positive early learning narrative
Workforce Stability	9. Retain a strong workforce through compensation and benefits 10. Expand educator learning and leadership capacity 11. Strengthen professional pathways and recognition
Access, Availability, and Capacity	12. Expand access for children with exceptional needs 13. Increase flexible and nontraditional care hours 14. Simplify pathways to make early learning affordable 15. Stabilize and strengthen the provider ecosystem 16. Balance the geographic distribution of services
Family Experience and Trust	17. Create trusted "doorways" for all families to access services 18. Strengthen practices that improve communication and engagement across languages and communities 19. Grow a high-quality mixed-delivery system

The report ends with a timeline for putting the plan into action.

⁷ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): About the Council for Quality Education and Care of Children.

The report, plan, and timeline are living documents and should be reviewed twice a year because making regular updates allows for continued community engagement and ongoing improvements, ensuring the strategic plan reflects community input over the next five years.

Moving Forward—Together

San Joaquin County has a real opportunity to strengthen early learning and care for all children.

Doing this work will take collective effort, strong partnerships, and ongoing listening. It means keeping children like [Mateo](#)—and the families and educators who support them—at the center of every decision.

This plan is an invitation and a promise:

- to work together,

- to act with purpose, and

- to invest early—so all children in San Joaquin County can succeed in school and in life.

Preparing the 2026 Strategic Plan

How We Built This Plan—Together

This Strategic Plan was built with a clear intention: to guide real work, by real people, in real time. It is not a static document or a one-time exercise. It is a shared roadmap for how partners across San Joaquin County will learn together, act together, and improve together with a long-term view.

“We’re not asking for another report. We’re asking for something we can actually use—something that helps us work together instead of each of us trying to solve the same problems alone.”⁸

Like raising a child, strengthening an early learning and care system takes time, care, and consistent effort. Progress does not happen all at once—but it does happen when people align around common goals, use shared information, and commit to steady improvement. This planning process was designed to reflect that reality and to model the kind of collaboration this plan calls for.

Inputs and Data Sources

Grounded in evidence and lived experience

This plan is rooted in a mixed-method approach that brings together data, experience, and community insight. Building on the Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment, community listening sessions and brief surveys captured strategic insights from over 50 families and caregivers, nearly 60 childcare providers and partners from critical workgroups, and approximately 40 SJCOE staff; combined with a social media analysis from over 200 families with young children in San Joaquin County.^{9,10} Quantitative data helped us understand scale and patterns—where access is limited, where demand is growing, and where capacity is strained. Qualitative input brought those numbers to life, revealing how families, providers, and educators experience the system each day.

⁸ Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

⁹ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 3-8 - Methodology.

¹⁰ [Summary Table of Community Engagement Data Collection](#): A summary organizing data collection from surveys, focus groups, working sessions, and the social media analysis into a single reference table showing who was engaged and how and when they were consulted.

What the Process Revealed

Across listening sessions and surveys, people expressed both hope and exhaustion—hope that early learning can change outcomes, and exhaustion from navigating a system that often requires persistence, insider knowledge, and personal networks to make it work.

Together, these inputs create a mutual understanding of what is happening now and where collective action can make the greatest difference. Just as importantly, this process reinforced a core belief: no single dataset or organization holds the full picture. Meaningful solutions emerge when information is shared, perspectives are respected, and insights are considered together.

Making Meaning from What We Heard and Saw

Turning information into direction

Rather than treating data and feedback as separate streams, insights were intentionally synthesized to identify clear, recurring signals. These signals represent issues and opportunities that emerged across various sources and audiences. When families, providers, and system partners point to the same challenges and strengths, it creates both urgency and alignment.

What We Learned

When families, providers, and system partners all point to the same challenges—such as workforce instability, access gaps, or navigation difficulties—it signals not just urgency, but readiness for aligned action.

This approach ensures that the strategies in this plan are not theoretical. They reflect what people are already experiencing, and they point toward actions that partners can realistically take together.

Engagement as a Practice, Not a Moment

How collaboration continues

Community engagement was designed as the starting point of an ongoing practice, not the end of a consultation. Participants were invited to share what they see and need. They were also invited to react to emerging ideas, identify priorities, and signal where the system should focus its energy first.

This approach reinforces a key expectation of the plan: implementation will remain community-informed. As conditions change, learning continues. As strategies are tested, feedback shapes refinement.

Shared Roles in Collective Implementation

Who leads, supports, and aligns

This plan is designed for collective implementation. Success depends on coordinated effort across county offices, school districts, early learning providers, community-based organizations, health and social service partners, higher education, and philanthropy.

“What gives this plan power is that it reflects what we see every day—and gives us a shared direction so we’re not all pulling in different directions.”¹¹

CQECC’s role is to support this collaboration by convening partners, aligning information, strengthening capacity, and helping the system learn from what works. Implementation, however, will be achieved collectively. Progress depends on each partner staying connected to a common direction.

Accountability Through Learning and Action

Keeping the plan alive

To ensure this plan leads to action rather than sitting on a shelf, the CQECC and community partners will provide:

- Regular public updates that show how feedback and data are shaping decisions,
- Annual opportunities to revisit priorities and adjust course, and
- Common tools and dashboards that support collective understanding of progress.

This structure allows partners to see themselves in the work. They are not just implementers of strategies, but co-owners of outcomes.

“Accountability isn’t about pointing fingers—it’s about knowing whether what we’re doing is actually helping families. When we can see the progress together, we can fix things together.”¹¹

¹¹ Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

Why This Matters

Transparency is not just about reporting. It is about helping people see how their actions contribute to collective progress. It is about helping people see where collective course correction is needed.

San Joaquin County Today: Strengths, Realities, and Opportunities for Collective Action

San Joaquin County’s early learning and care system is shaped by both deep strengths and real constraints. Recognizing both is essential—not to assign blame, but to focus collective effort where it can have the greatest impact.

Community Assets to Build On

Across San Joaquin County, early learning and care providers, educators, and partners are already doing critical work that supports children and families every day. These strengths provide momentum for the next phase of improvement.

“Even when resources are tight, we show up. We don’t just teach—we help families stay housed, get food, find support, and keep going.”¹²

The county benefits from a varied, mixed-delivery system that offers families multiple entry points into early learning. Providers regularly serve children with complex needs and respond creatively to changing family circumstances. Strong cross-sector partnerships allow early learning programs to function as trusted connectors to health care, emotional well-being supports, housing, nutrition, and family services.

Professional learning, coaching, and leadership development are already embedded across many settings, supporting continuous improvement and collective learning. Early literacy is a shared priority across all strategy areas in this plan, especially those focused on family engagement, workforce development, and coordination between early learning programs and elementary schools. In many communities, long-standing relationships between families and providers have built trust that cannot be replaced by policy alone.

This plan is designed to strengthen, align, and expand these existing assets—not replace them.

¹² Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

Shared Realities That Call for Action

Community input matches what we saw in the Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment. Together, they show what is getting in the way today: gaps in access, workforce challenges, and uneven services across neighborhoods. The growing number of children with special needs and other complex circumstances increases the importance of coordination and early support.

Why Collective Action Is Urgent – Key Finding

Families across San Joaquin County are deeply motivated to participate in early learning. What holds them back is not lack of interest—it is limited availability, complex pathways, and uncertainty about where to turn next. Families and providers consistently describe a system that requires persistence to navigate—often relying on personal networks to find information or secure care.

“I know my child would thrive in the right place. The hardest part isn’t wanting early learning—it’s finding it, trusting it, and making it work with our lives.”¹³

These realities underscore the need for clearer pathways, stronger alignment, and joint problem-solving.

Equity Through Focus and Partnership

Meeting different needs with common purpose

Families and providers do not experience the early learning system in the same way. Language, work schedules, geography, children’s learning or developmental needs, and family income shape what support looks like in practice. Recognizing these differences allows strategies to be more targeted, responsive, and effective.

By acknowledging different starting points and committing to fairness in opportunity and support, partners can focus on what matters most—while staying aligned around common goals.

Why Collective Action Matters

When systems remain fragmented, families and providers are asked to compensate on their own. When partners align, the burden shifts—and the system becomes easier to navigate, trust, and sustain.

¹³ [Parent listening sessions](#), Nov 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

Why This Matters for the Next Five Years

We established the foundation for action. They clarify how this plan was built, what the system is working with today, and why collaboration is essential moving forward. Most importantly, they signal an aligned commitment.

This plan belongs to the people implementing it. It can be revisited, refined, and strengthened for years to come. And it is intended to guide real decisions, real investments, and real improvements for children and families across San Joaquin County.

Voice of Families and Early Childhood Staff

Listening First

Across San Joaquin County, families and early childhood professionals share a deep commitment to children's growth and well-being. At the same time, many describe a landscape that feels fragmented, inconsistent, and difficult to navigate.

Through surveys, focus groups, and facilitated conversations, families and educators provided honest reflections on what is working and where support falls short. Their experiences show both the strength of their work and the pressure of the system.

Through the Eyes of Families

For many families, early learning begins with hope and uncertainty. Parents describe wanting stability for their children, yet struggle to find programs that align with their work schedules, financial realities, and children's needs. Navigating enrollment forms, rules, and differences between programs can feel overwhelming, especially for families balancing multiple responsibilities or facing language challenges.

*"I know there are programs out there, but I don't always know which one is right, or how to apply without making a mistake."*¹⁴

Families consistently shared that access is not just about availability; it is about clarity. Even when programs exist, understanding how to enroll, what support is offered, and what to expect can be confusing and discouraging.

¹⁴ [Parent listening sessions](#), Nov 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

*“Yo quiero apoyar a mi hijo, pero a veces no sé por dónde empezar ni a quién preguntar.” [I want to support my son, but sometimes I don't know where to start or who to ask.]*¹⁴

Key themes from family voices included:

- Access and affordability: Many families reported long waitlists and difficulty finding care that fits their schedules or budgets.
- Navigation challenges: Confusion about eligibility, enrollment steps, and program differences was widespread.
- Trust and stability: Families value consistency—both in caregivers and in communication—and feel unsettled by frequent staff turnover.
- Cultural and linguistic connection: Families emphasized the importance of programs that reflect their lived experience and local context.

What this tells us is that families are engaged but navigating systems that do not always reflect the realities of their daily lives.

What Families and Caregivers Are Telling Us Through the Data

Survey results reinforce these lived experiences. Across responses, families most often prioritized:

- Affordability and financial support, including help understanding subsidies and eligibility
- Reliable access to care, especially for infants, toddlers, and nontraditional work hours
- Clear communication, including consistent information across programs
- Supportive, stable educators who build trust and continuity for children

*“It's not that families don't want to participate, it's that the system is hard to figure out, and mistakes feel costly.”*¹⁵

Families in many parts of the county and across languages named the same priorities, suggesting common challenges across families in the county. The data show that when systems are difficult to navigate, families often rely on informal networks or trial-and-error. This can increase stress and create uneven access to early learning opportunities.

¹⁵ [Parent listening sessions](#), Nov 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

*“Hay programas, pero entender cómo funcionan y cómo inscribirse es muy complicado.” [There are programs, but understanding how they work and how to register is very complicated.]*¹⁵

Perspectives from Early Childhood Staff

Early childhood educators and providers echoed many of the same themes, and often with added urgency. Educators spoke with pride about their work and deep care for the children they serve. At the same time, they described the strain of operating within systems that make it difficult to sustain quality with a long-term view. Common themes included:

- Workforce instability, driven by low compensation and limited advancement opportunities
- Burnout and turnover disrupt relationships with children and families
- Administrative complexity, including duplicative requirements and unclear processes
- A desire for stronger coordination across agencies and programs

*“We want to focus on children, but too often, we’re stretched thin trying to manage systems that don’t talk to each other.”*¹⁶

In other words, educators are not short on commitment; they are short on the system support they need to keep quality high for years to come. Educators emphasized that meaningful improvement requires not only individual dedication but also structural support. This support needs clear expectations, aligned systems, and mutual responsibility among partners.

What These Voices Tell Us

Taken together, families and early childhood professionals are asking for the same thing: a system that works *with* them, not around them. These voices form the foundation for the next phase of this plan. Their experiences point to a need for:

- Clearer pathways and communication
- Better coordination across programs and agencies
- Stronger support for the workforce
- Systems designed around real family needs, not the way programs and offices are set up

¹⁶ Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

Setting the Stage for Change

These insights do more than describe challenges; they point toward possibilities.

They reveal where alignment is missing, where trust can be strengthened, and where focused action can make the greatest difference. Most importantly, they show that lasting improvement will not come from isolated fixes, but from coordinated effort across the system.

*“Solo queremos sentir que nuestros hijos están en un lugar seguro y que alguien nos puede orientar.” [We just want to feel that our children are in a safe place and that someone can guide us.]*¹⁷

Together, these voices point to a shared responsibility: to move from listening to action, and from intention to impact. The next section, *How Change Happens*, outlines how that shift can take shape.

¹⁷ [Parent listening sessions](#), Nov 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

How Change Happens

From Insight to Action

The stories from families and early childhood staff show something important: real change happens when the whole system works together, when people know their roles, and when support addresses the challenges that families and providers face every day.

This section explains how change can happen by connecting three things: what we know now, what we do next, and what we hope to see across this planning period. It also describes what needs to be in place so progress can last and be realized across the county.

A Shared Picture of Change

At the heart of this plan is a simple idea: when the right support is in place, good things are more likely to happen for children, families, and providers.

- Families do well when they can find stable, high-quality early learning and care.
- Providers do well when they earn fair pay, get support, and are part of strong teams and networks.
- Children do best when both families and providers are supported.

This plan also recognizes that lasting progress does not come from one single program. It comes from improving the conditions that shape the early learning and care system as a whole. These conditions connect directly to the six goals in this plan: Community Leadership and Common Purpose; System Improvement; Communication and Navigation; Workforce Stability; Access, Availability, and Capacity; and Family Experience and Trust.

In simple terms, this means:

- Creating the right conditions: Align rules, funding, and tools so programs can focus on quality instead of just trying to get by.
- Strengthening systems and people: Support the staff, leaders, and partners who serve children and families every day.
- Moving together, not alone: Make sure efforts in different agencies and sectors support each other instead of working at cross-purposes.

When these pieces work together, they create a solid base for real and lasting change.

A Continuum of Support for Families

Children and families need a continuum of support, from light help to more intensive services, depending on what families need at different times.

This continuum includes:

- Universal support for all families, such as clear information, welcoming spaces, and shared quality standards.
- Targeted support for families with specific needs, like help with language access, unstable income, or key transitions.
- Intensive support for children and families facing serious or complex situations, which may require several agencies to work together on one plan.

These layers work best when they are connected. Families should be able to move smoothly from one level of support to another as their needs change, without starting over each time.

What Needs to Be in Place for Change to Last

For this approach to work across San Joaquin County, several conditions must be in place:

- Aligned systems and mutual accountability across agencies and partners, so everyone is working toward the same goals.
- A stable and supported workforce, with clear paths to grow, stay, and lead in the field.
- Reliable data and open communication, so partners can learn and improve.
- Funding that supports long-term planning, not just short-term fixes.

Together, these conditions create the foundation for collective action—linking people, systems, and resources so progress can be sustained. Families and providers will continue to play a central role in checking progress. Partners commit to learning together, adjusting plans when needed, and staying focused on shared outcomes instead of only on individual programs.

A Way of Working, Not a Checklist

This framework is not a one-time checklist. It is a way of working together. One that supports ongoing learning, mutual responsibility, and continuous improvement through sustained effort.

The sections that follow translate this approach into clear strategies and actions. Grounded in the voices of families and providers, and shaped by the realities of San Joaquin County, they show how the region can move from ideas to action, and continue to learn and adapt along the way.

Model of Early Childhood Success

Together, these goals translate the plan's core commitments, shared leadership, continuous learning, and coordinated action into clear focus areas that guide how partners work, decide, and adapt across this planning period.

Building on the collective conditions for change outlined above, this model translates vision into action. It reflects how partners across San Joaquin County can work together to strengthen early learning over the next five years.

Each goal includes strategies that show how the early learning system can grow stronger, more connected, and more responsive to the needs of children and families. Together, they reflect community priorities and outline a practical path toward sustained improvement.

Goal: Community Leadership and Shared Purpose

Community Leadership and Shared Purpose means building an early learning system where families, educators, administrators, and community partners share a common vision and work together toward the same goals. In this kind of system, families are not just participants—they are partners. Their voices are heard, their experiences inform decisions, and their children benefit from greater consistency and coordination across programs and settings.

This goal emerged directly from some community feedback highlighting misalignment across the early learning system. Families and providers described inconsistent expectations, disconnected priorities, and limited opportunities for community voice to influence decisions. When the system lacks shared purpose, the burden falls on families—particularly those already navigating stress, transitions, or barriers to access. When families feel confused, unheard, or excluded, children experience the greatest impact.

Success under Community Leadership and Shared Purpose looks like a connected system guided by common values and mutual accountability. Trust is built as families, educators, administrators, and partners listen to one another and learn together. Families like [Mateo's](#) don't feel like the goal posts shift when they switch schools, and feel like they are co-educators with a voice in the community. The system strengthens through sustained effort by continuously incorporating community feedback into improvement efforts. No matter where a child enters the early learning system—or how often their family's circumstances change—they are supported by a unified community working toward the same outcomes for children.

Strategy 1: Elevate families as leaders and partners through meaningful engagement, collaboration, and co-educator roles across the early learning system.

Some families report that they are not consistently seen as partners in the early learning system.¹⁸ Elevating families as leaders and co-educators supports children by strengthening alignment between home and classroom experiences and ensuring families feel heard as active participants in their children’s education. Establishing clear, consistent processes for gathering and incorporating family feedback can help ensure family voices meaningfully inform early learning decisions.

“They keep asking parents to fill out surveys, but I’ve never seen anything actually change.”¹⁸

Families and providers alike note a need for broader and more meaningful opportunities for family engagement. Families want clearer avenues to provide input that leads to system improvement, and providers believe stronger parent engagement would positively impact early learning outcomes. Expanding learning opportunities for families—such as supports related to child development and parenting skills—can help the system better reflect the needs, experiences, and strengths of the families it serves.¹⁹

Families also report difficulty accessing essential resources that support children’s well-being, including food and housing assistance. Strengthening collaboration among families, early learning providers, and community organizations can improve coordination and access to these supports, creating a more responsive and holistic early learning system that addresses both educational and basic needs.²⁰

Strategy 2: Strengthen cross-system partnerships and shared learning networks that help continuous collaboration and information-sharing.

Families and staff alike express a need for stronger connections to community resources and partners. Families report challenges accessing essential supports such as food assistance, housing, health care, and wellness services, while staff emphasize the importance of deeper collaboration among families, schools, and local organizations. Improving how families are

¹⁸ [Parent listening sessions](#), Nov 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

¹⁹ Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

²⁰ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 57-59, 69, 73-74, 79 - Figures 100-101, 119, 125, 136. Pages 88-90 - Take Aways and Recommendations.

connected to these resources strengthens the overall early learning system and better positions children for success.¹⁸⁻²⁰

Providers also note the need for a stronger common learning network to better support children and families.²¹ Building aligned learning networks among community-based organizations, center-based providers, and home-based providers allows partners to maximize available resources and build collective capacity. When partners have access to common tools, information, and support, they are better equipped to provide consistent, high-quality experiences for children and families.

Families additionally report that navigating the early learning system is often confusing and fragmented.²² Many describe limited awareness of available programs, unclear application processes, and inconsistent or unanswered information as major challenges to access. Strengthening information-sharing networks across the early learning system can help ensure families receive timely, accurate, and consistent guidance, reducing confusion and improving access to early learning and care.²³

Strategy 3: Center improvement cycles around a balanced community voice.

The community wants a stronger focus on its voice.²¹ They want the early learning system to have an open mind to learning opportunities and fairness.²² This strategy focuses on how system decisions are evaluated, improved, and held accountable as implementation unfolds. By centering improvement cycles around community voice, learning, and fairness, we support our children by ensuring that their education system is always advancing with an eye towards a level playing field.

Building on existing partnerships and opportunities, the CQECC will incorporate community input into the continued growth of our system. Additionally, consider participating in an early childhood education accreditation process to ensure programs meet or exceed standards.

²¹ Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

²² [Parent listening sessions & surveys](#). Nov-Dec 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

²³ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Page 79 - Figure 136.

Goal: System Improvement

System Improvement means strengthening the early learning system so it is easier to access, easier to understand, and easier to trust. When systems function well, families can move through early learning with clarity and confidence, and children receive support when it can make the greatest difference.

This goal emerged from community feedback describing the early learning system as challenging to navigate. Some families struggle to find answers when working through websites, agencies, eligibility rules, and timelines.^{24, 25} Parents and caregivers expressed frustration with long waitlists and unclear pathways for screenings and early interventions, as well as uncertainty around transitions between preschool, Transitional Kindergarten (TK), and kindergarten.²⁶ Many also noted the absence of simple, practical tools to support their child's development at home.

These challenges are felt most strongly by families from historically underserved backgrounds, and include language barriers which further restrict access, placing additional stress on families and delaying support for children who would benefit most from early learning and intervention.

“We’re on a waiting list for speech therapy. Has anyone found a program in Stockton that doesn’t take 6+ months to get in?”²⁵

Success in a system that prioritizes System Improvement looks like a seamless and welcoming experience from a family's first point of contact onward. Families like [Mateo's](#) feel supported rather than overwhelmed, receiving tools to help their son at home and the peace of mind that he is in a safe, quality program. Children receive the right support at the right time, and the early learning system operates as a coordinated whole that continuously improves in response to community needs.

Strategy 4: Provide simple educational support tools for child development.

Families want to support their children's learning but do not believe the current system consistently provides easy-to-use, practical resources to do so. By offering clear, accessible educational tools that families can use at home, the early learning system can extend learning beyond the classroom and support children's development in everyday environments.^{24, 25}

²⁴ [Parent listening sessions & surveys](#), Nov-Dec 2025.

²⁵ [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

²⁶ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 38-39, 56-57 - Figures 73, 74, 99.

Strategy 5: Leverage technology to increase and improve infrastructure and access.

Community feedback indicates that the early learning system has not consistently kept pace with available technological advancements.²⁷ Families want reliable access to real-time information about eligibility, services, and availability, yet current systems often limit visibility and coordination.

“I’ve read the district site three times and I still don’t understand if my child qualifies for TK.”²⁸

By strategically leveraging technology to strengthen system infrastructure—such as improving data sharing, service availability tracking, and access platforms—the early learning system can reduce barriers, improve efficiency, and make it easier for families and children to access the services and supports they need.

Strategy 6: Strengthen program quality, oversight, and transparency to build trust through clear safety and quality signals.

Community members believe program quality across the early learning system is inconsistent. Families want safe, high-quality environments for their children, and health and safety are the top factors in their decision-making. Providers also identified the need for funding to improve facilities, including playgrounds and buildings.

“Some daycares are amazing and others feel totally chaotic. I don’t understand how the standards can be so different.”²⁸

By strengthening oversight and support systems—and clearly communicating safety and quality expectations—the early learning system can build trust with families. Sharing what we learn helps families make informed choices and reinforce confidence that children are learning in safe, supportive environments.²⁹

²⁷ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Page 97 - Figure 166. Pages 88-90 - Take Aways and Recommendations.

²⁸ [Parent listening sessions](#), Nov 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

²⁹ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 38-40 - Figures 74, 75. Pages 88-90 - Take Aways and Recommendations.

Goal: Communications and Navigation

Communications and Navigation means ensuring families can easily find, understand, and trust information about the early learning system. Families should receive clear and consistent information through channels they already use and trust. This goal recognizes that access to early learning depends not only on the availability of services, but on how clearly and effectively those services are communicated.

This goal emerged from community feedback showing that some families feel lost and frustrated when trying to navigate the early learning system.³⁰ Parents and caregivers offered that there are times when they do not know which programs exist, whether they qualify, or how and when to apply or reapply for services such as subsidies.³⁰ Families also reported receiving inconsistent or conflicting information from different sources, leaving questions unanswered.

These challenges are most pronounced for families who speak multiple languages, who described language barriers and communications that do not reflect their backgrounds or lived experiences. At the same time, negative community narratives about early learning—often amplified through social media—discourage family engagement and reduce interest among potential providers and staff.

“Any recommendations for preschools that really communicate with parents? Our last place never told us anything unless we asked.”³¹

Success in a system that prioritizes Communications and Navigation looks like families receiving timely, accurate, and consistent information from the start. In this successful system, families like [Mateo’s](#) feel confident rather than confused thanks to clear communication from his school, their questions are answered quickly and reliably, and their son benefits from timely access to high-quality early learning opportunities.

Strategy 7: Strengthen communication approaches to support engagement in the local context.

Many families lack clarity about early learning programs, including what options are available, who is eligible, how to enroll, and how children transition between programs.^{30, 31} Families identified limited awareness of programs and unclear application processes as major barriers to accessing early learning and care. Increasing clarity around programs, eligibility requirements, enrollment steps, and transitions helps families better understand and navigate the system).³⁰⁻³²

³⁰ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 38-39, 86-87 - Figures 73, 74, 151-152.

³¹ [Parent listening sessions & surveys](#), Nov-Dec 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025

³² Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

“I had no idea TK was even a thing until a friend mentioned it. Why isn’t the school telling parents earlier?”³³

Families from a wide range of backgrounds also experience challenges navigating system communications, particularly families who identified language barriers as a significant obstacle. Building clear communication supports in multiple languages builds equitable access and ensures families from diverse communities can engage meaningfully with early learning opportunities.^{33, 34}

Families further explained that early learning communications do not always feel modern or coordinated. Parents and caregivers identified email, text messaging, online portals, social media, and in-person meetings as preferred ways to receive information. Modernizing and aligning these communication channels—while maintaining a coherent, systemwide approach to messaging—can provide families with timely, consistent, and accessible information to better support their children.³⁴

Strategy 8: Build shared values and reframe the narrative about early learning to promote a common understanding across families, providers, and systems.

Some families perceive the early learning system as fragmented, with different programs and agencies operating independently. Establishing and clearly communicating shared values across the system can create greater consistency and coherence for families, helping them better understand how early learning works and what to expect. When shared values are reflected across programs, partners, and communication channels, the system is better positioned to support all children.^{33, 34}

At the same time, not all community members fully appreciate the inherent value of the early learning system in shaping children which represent our future.³⁵ Reframing the narrative by elevating positive stories, highlighting the benefits of early learning, and using trusted messengers—such as families, providers, and community influencers—can build broader understanding and confidence in the system. A stronger, more consistent public narrative can increase family engagement and help attract and retain a committed early learning workforce.^{33, 34}

³³ [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

³⁴ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 38-39, 43-44, 60, 62, 70-71, 79 - Figures 73, 74, 80, 103, 107, 120, 136.

³⁵ [Parent listening sessions & surveys](#), Nov-Dec 2025.

Goal: Workforce Stability

Workforce Stability means building and sustaining a strong, supported, and varied early learning workforce so children experience consistent, high-quality care from well-prepared educators. A stable workforce is the foundation of quality early learning. It shapes children’s development, strengthens family trust, and creates learning environments where children feel safe, understood, and supported.

This goal emerged from consistent feedback from educators and families who identified staffing challenges as one of the most serious obstacles facing the early learning system.³⁶ Providers conveyed how difficult it is to hire and retain high-quality staff when wages and benefits are not competitive. Current and former employees described leaving roles due to low compensation, burnout, and a lack of clear advancement or recognition.

Families expressed concern about frequent staff turnover and the disruption it causes for their children—particularly for those with behavioral, developmental, exceptional, or multilingual needs who rely on stable relationships and consistent support. Community feedback also highlighted gaps in educator preparation for representative, multilingual, and universally designed learning environments, leaving some children without the support they need.^{37, 38}

“I visited two places today. One said they’re ‘desperate for staff.’ Makes me nervous about leaving my baby there.”³⁹

Success in a system that prioritizes Workforce Stability looks like educators feeling valued, supported, and motivated to remain in the field. Families trust that their children are cared for by skilled, consistent educators. Children like [Mateo](#) benefit from strong relationships with experienced educators that are trained to address the many needs of the children in San Joaquin County. They develop in stable learning environments, and the early learning system is strengthened by a workforce that is resilient, prepared, and reflective of the communities it serves.

³⁶ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 43-47, 56-57, 59, 61-62 - Figures 80, 83, 85-86, 99, 102, 105, 107.

³⁷ [Parent listening sessions & surveys](#), Nov-Dec 2025.

³⁸ Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

³⁹ [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

Strategy 9: Develop strategies to retain a strong, varied workforce by strengthening compensation and benefits.

Providers consistently identify hiring and retaining high-quality staff as one of the greatest challenges to delivering strong early learning and care programming.⁴⁰ Staff emphasized that increasing wages and strengthening benefits are critical priorities for building a sustainable workforce over the well beyond the life of this plan.⁴¹ Competitive compensation and benefits help attract skilled educators and incentivize them to remain in the early learning system, directly supporting program quality and children’s learning experiences.⁴⁰⁻⁴²

“When you break down what a preschool teacher makes, it’s often less than we pay someone at In & Out Burger... Until we can get them a professional wage, ELC will not be seen as a career, but rather a stepping stone.”⁴³

Current and former employees, along with families, report that the lack of effective retention strategies contributes to frequent staff turnover, which negatively impacts children’s stability and continuity of care. Strengthening compensation and benefits is a foundational step toward retaining a strong, diverse workforce and improving consistency in classrooms.

Strategy 10: Expand educator learning and leadership, Universal Design for Learning, multilingual, representation.

Families expressed that difficulty finding programs equipped to support their children’s behavioral, developmental, exceptional, or multilingual needs is a significant barrier to accessing early learning.⁴² Some families described programs discouraging children from using their home languages, while providers noted an increasing number of children with disabilities entering early learning settings.

By expanding educator learning and leadership—particularly in Universal Design for Learning, and incorporating the needs of the local community—the early learning system can better prepare educators to support a wider range of learners.⁴⁰ Strengthening professional learning opportunities ensures educators have the skills and confidence to meet diverse needs and create environments where all children can thrive.^{40-42, 44}

⁴⁰ Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

⁴¹ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 43-47, 56-57, 59, 61-62 - Figures 80, 83, 85-86, 99, 102, 105, 107.

⁴² [Parent listening sessions & surveys](#), Nov-Dec 2025.

⁴³ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Page 95.

⁴⁴ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 27-28, 46, 56, 62, 66, 73-74, 82-84, 96-97 - Figures 53-56, 85, 98, 107, 113, 125, 144-147, 163-166.

Strategy 11: Strengthen professional pathways and recognition systems.

Providers and families expressed frustration with chronic staffing shortages and inconsistent classroom experiences. Educators often lack clear professional pathways, advancement opportunities, and recognition for their work, contributing to burnout and turnover.

By strengthening professional pathways and recognition systems, the early learning system can support educators' long-term growth and commitment to the field.⁴⁵ When educators feel valued and see opportunities for advancement, programs are better positioned to maintain stable staffing—giving families greater confidence and children more consistent care.

“Why do daycares go through so many teachers? This is the third new teacher in my daughter’s classroom this year.”⁴⁶

Goal: Access, Availability, and Capacity

Access, Availability, and Capacity means ensuring early learning and care options are available, affordable, and responsive to the real lives of families across San Joaquin County. This goal focuses on helping families find care that works for their schedules, locations, financial circumstances, and children’s unique needs.

This goal emerged from consistent community feedback showing that many families struggle to find open and affordable early learning options. Families said that available programs often do not align with their work schedules—especially for those needing early morning, evening, weekend, or overnight care. Long waitlists, limited openings, and a lack of nearby programs in certain parts of the county further restrict access.

Financial barriers limit availability. Complicated subsidy pathways prevent some families from qualifying for or maintaining assistance, while others find care unaffordable even when support exists. Families of children with exceptional needs described additional challenges finding programs equipped to meet their children’s behavioral, developmental, or health-related needs.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 27-28, 46, 56, 62, 66, 73-74, 82-84, 96-97 - Figures 53-56, 85, 98, 107, 113, 125, 144-147, 163-166. Page 107 - Workforce Investment.

⁴⁶ [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

“We just moved to Lathrop. Is it normal that every preschool I call says they’re full until next year? Feeling really stuck.”⁴⁷

Success in a system that prioritizes Access, Availability, and Capacity looks like families finding care when and where they need it—without unnecessary financial or logistical hurdles. In this successful system, children like [Mateo](#) have access to flexible learning environments that reflect the real dynamics of San Joaquin County families. Parents like [Mateo’s](#) don’t have to worry about finding a new school when they move across the county, or when their work schedules change. In this system, learning is dependable and balanced across the county, allowing children to thrive and families to feel confident that their needs are met.

Strategy 12: Expand access for children with exceptional needs.

Many children in San Joaquin County have exceptional needs, and county data shows higher exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences compared to state averages.⁴⁸ Families shared that difficulty finding programs equipped to support their children’s behavioral, developmental, or exceptional needs is a significant barrier to accessing early learning and care.^{49, 50}

By expanding access for children with exceptional needs, the early learning system can better match children with appropriate supports and services, ensuring they receive care that reflects their individual strengths and circumstances.^{48, 49}

Strategy 13: Increase flexible, nontraditional hours and variable schedule access.

Families consistently reported that existing childcare options do not align with their work schedules. Many expressed frustration with limited early drop-off, lack of aftercare, and few options for evening, weekend, or overnight care.

“Our TK doesn’t offer aftercare. How are parents supposed to pick up at 11:30 if they work full time?”⁴⁵

Hours of operation were cited as a top factor when choosing early learning and care. By increasing flexible, nontraditional hours and variable schedule access, the early learning system can better meet the realities of working families and ensure care is available when it is needed most.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹

⁴⁷ [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

⁴⁸ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 27-28, 46, 56, 62, 66, 73-74, 82-84, 96-97 - Figures 53-56, 85, 98, 107, 113, 125, 144-147, 163-166.

⁴⁹ [Parent listening sessions & surveys](#). Nov-Dec 2025.

⁵⁰ [CSCC County Self Assessment](#).

Strategy 14: Make early learning financially attainable through simplified pathways.

Many families believe early learning is not financially attainable. Families expressed that not qualifying for free or reduced-cost care is a major barrier to access, while staff across the system identified reducing financial burdens on families as a top priority for the coming years. Complex and unclear subsidy pathways prevent some families from accessing or maintaining support.

*“Can someone explain the [childcare] subsidy? I applied but got a letter I don’t understand. Do I need to start over?”*⁵¹

By simplifying financial pathways, expanding reduced-cost options, and ensuring frontline providers offer consistent subsidy guidance, the early learning system can make care more attainable for more families.^{51, 52, 53, 54}

Strategy 15: Stabilize and strengthen the provider ecosystem, especially home-based providers.

Families reported long waitlists and a lack of available spaces as major barriers to accessing early learning and care.^{51, 55} At the same time, the number of children ages four and five has increased each year from 2020–21 through 2024–25, placing additional strain on provider capacity.^{52, 55}

“I’ve been waiting for a Head Start spot since I adopted my foster daughter in 2022 and she only just received her spot three months ago after they built a new center near us. That’s too long to wait.”

Providers—particularly home-based providers—conveyed that they lack sufficient support to sustain or expand services.⁵² By strengthening and stabilizing the provider ecosystem, the early learning system can increase capacity, support provider sustainability, and expand high-quality options for families.^{52, 53}

⁵¹ [Parent listening sessions & surveys](#), Nov-Dec 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025.

⁵² [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Pages 10, 38-39, 46-47, 56-57 - Figures 11, 73, 74, 85-86, 99.

⁵³ Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

⁵⁴ [SJCOE Early Education Services \(EES\) and Head Start Staff listening session](#), Dec 2025.

⁵⁵ [CSCC County Self Assessment](#).

Strategy 16: Prioritize balance in the geographic distribution of early childhood services.

Some families shared that early learning opportunities are limited or unavailable where they live.⁵⁶ Certain areas of San Joaquin County have fewer nearby options, making location a significant barrier to access.

“It really feels like access depends on where you live and who you know.”⁵⁷

By prioritizing balance in the geographic distribution of early childhood services, the early learning system can reduce location-based inequities and ensure more families can access high-quality care close to home.⁵⁶

Goal: Family Experience and Trust Building

Family Experience and Trust Building means creating an early learning system where families feel welcomed, respected, and confident that their children are safe, supported, and understood. Trust is built through consistent experiences that center families as partners in their children’s learning and reflect their values, languages, and lived experiences.

This goal emerged from community feedback showing that some families feel disconnected from the early learning system and unsure whether it truly reflects who they are. Families expressed that they want more opportunities to provide input and help shape the programs serving their children. Multilingual families described language barriers and a lack of culturally understanding programming, while others emphasized the importance of safety and clear communication about expectations and support. Families also reported difficulty accessing community services beyond the classroom, highlighting the need for stronger coordination across systems.

“Looking for a preschool where my son can keep using some Spanish at home. His last center told him not to ‘mix languages’.”⁵⁷

Success in a system that prioritizes Family Experience and Trust Building looks like families feeling genuinely welcomed and valued as partners. Trust is built and sustained over time through clear communication and consistent support. Families like [Mateo’s](#) feel confident in the care their children receive, regardless of cultural or linguistic differences. Children thrive in environments shaped by strong relationships and shared responsibility.

⁵⁶ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Page 42-44, 70-71 - Figure 79-80, 120. Pages 88-90 - Take Aways and Recommendations.

⁵⁷ [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025

Strategy 17: Create trusted "doorways" for all families to access services based on local community needs.

Families described early learning funding and navigation systems as complex, frustrating, and difficult to manage. Many struggle to understand subsidies—particularly when and how to apply or reapply—while providers identified the cost of infant care as a major concern.

*“The official childcare websites are so confusing. I found better info here (on Reddit) than anywhere else.”*⁵⁸

Creating trusted funding and navigation pathways, supported by consistent guidance from frontline providers, can reduce confusion and improve access. Developing a clear, multilingual funding pathway or navigator tool would help families better understand subsidies, eligibility requirements, and next steps.^{58, 59}

Families also said that the early learning system does not always feel welcoming or easy to enter, especially for multilingual families. Confusion about preschool, TK, and kindergarten; required documentation; and where to begin often creates barriers to participation.

*“What’s the difference between State Preschool and TK? I keep getting mixed answers and I just want to make sure I pick the right program.”*⁵⁸

Establishing a unified, “front door” for early learning—one that simplifies the maze of websites, phone numbers, and agencies—can improve families’ first experiences with the system and support those who are not currently accessing services.^{58, 60}

Families also reported difficulty navigating screenings, early interventions, transitions, and referrals. Long wait times for evaluations and unclear eligibility pathways delay support and increase stress. Families described feeling “caught in between” programs, particularly during transitions between preschool, TK, and kindergarten.

Simplifying these pathways and offering clear, self-serve tools—such as a countywide developmental pathway guide or decision tree—can help children access the right supports at the right time while reducing the burden on families.^{61, 62, 63}

⁵⁸ [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025

⁵⁹ [SJCOE Early Education Services \(EES\) and Head Start Staff listening sessions, Dec 2025](#).

⁶⁰ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Page 42-44, 70-71 - Figure 79-80, 120. Pages 88-90 - Take Aways and Recommendations.

⁶¹ [Parent listening sessions & surveys](#), Nov-Dec 2025; [Family social media analysis](#), San Joaquin County, 2025

⁶² Childcare providers and partners listening sessions ([CDE and CDSS](#) Contractors, [CQECC](#), [CSCC](#), and [UPK](#) Mixed Delivery Workgroup), Oct-Dec 2025.

⁶³ [SJCOE Early Education Services \(EES\) and Head Start Staff listening sessions, Dec 2025](#).

Strategy 18: Strengthen practices that improve communication and engagement across languages and communities.

Current early learning practices do not consistently reflect the languages, cultures, and experiences of all families. Families who speak multiple languages reported that language barriers make it difficult to access early learning and care, and families emphasized that finding programs aligned with their cultural values is a top factor in their decision-making. When families' lived experiences are not reflected in programs, children are placed at a disadvantage.

“Are there any Hmong-speaking daycares or preschools in the area? My mom helps with pickup and English-only programs are hard for her.”⁶¹

Strengthening practices and programs that improve communication and engagement across languages and communities can improve access, engagement, and outcomes for children from diverse backgrounds. By ensuring programs are welcoming, representative, and aligned with families' languages and cultural preferences, the early learning system can better serve children and families across the county.⁶⁴

Strategy 19: Grow a thriving, mixed-delivery ecosystem with many high-quality settings for families' locations, schedules, and children's needs.

Families are more likely to trust the early learning system when they can choose from high-quality options that align with their schedules, locations, values, and children's unique needs. Community feedback shows that trust is weakened when families feel forced into programs that do not reflect their work hours, language preferences, cultural expectations, or concerns about safety and care.⁶¹

A strong mixed-delivery ecosystem—including center-based, home-based, school-based, and community-based settings—allows families to find environments where their children are understood, supported, and respected.⁶²⁻⁶⁴ By strengthening quality and stability across diverse settings, the early learning system reduces fear-driven decisions, supports continuity for children, and builds trust through consistent, positive family experiences as implementation unfolds.

⁶⁴ [Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#): Page 42-44, 70-71, 79 - Figure 79-80, 120, 136. Pages 88-90 - Take Aways and Recommendations.

Timeline and Implementation

Implementation of this strategic plan will take time and collaboration from many people, including community leaders, county staff, providers, caregivers, family members, and the community. While all of the goals and strategies are important, it is not realistic to assume that all of the work can begin in 2026, and therefore the work is recommended to begin at different times.

In the first year, the focus is on listening, aligning, and laying groundwork. This ensures that families, providers, and partners share an understanding of how the early learning system works and how voices from the community help shape it. In years two and three, the plan moves from preparation to action. Families begin to see clearer pathways, educators receive stronger support, and coordination across programs becomes more visible and effective. In Years 4 and 5, the focus is on strengthening what works, expanding access, and ensuring long-term sustainability. This phase helps the early learning system remain responsive, trusted, and balanced for years to come.

Year 1 Strengthening the Foundation Together		
Strategy 1: Elevate families as leaders and partners through meaningful engagement, collaboration, and co-educator roles across the early learning system.	Strategy 7: Strengthen communication approaches to support engagement in the local context.	Strategy 13: Increase flexible, nontraditional hours and variable schedule access.
Strategy 4: Provide simple educational support tools for child development.	Strategy 9: Develop strategies to retain a strong, varied workforce by strengthening compensation and benefits.	Strategy 17: Create trusted "doorways" for all families to access services based on local community needs
Strategy 5: Leverage technology to increase and improve infrastructure and access.	Strategy 12: Expand access for children with exceptional needs.	Strategy 18: Strengthen practices that improve communication and engagement across languages and communities.

Years 2-3

Focusing on Access and Support

Strategy 2: Strengthen cross-system partnerships and shared learning networks that help continuous collaboration and information-sharing.

Strategy 3: Center improvement cycles around a balanced community voice.

Strategy 6: Strengthen program quality, oversight, and transparency to build trust through clear safety and quality signals.

Strategy 8: Build shared values and reframe the narrative about early learning to promote a common understanding across families, providers, and systems.

Strategy 10: Expand educator learning and leadership, Universal Design for Learning, multilingual, representation.

Strategy 14: Make early learning financially attainable through simplified pathways.

Years 4-5

Sustaining Trust for Long-Term Impact

Strategy 11: Strengthen professional pathways and recognition systems.

Strategy 15: Strengthen and stabilize the provider ecosystem, especially home-based providers.

Strategy 16: Prioritize balance in the geographic distribution of early childhood services.

Strategy 19: Grow a thriving, mixed-delivery ecosystem with many high-quality settings for families' locations, schedules, and their children's needs.

Conclusion: Growing Together With a Long-Term View

Nurturing a child is not about quick fixes or one-time solutions. It is about creating the conditions for growth—listening closely, responding thoughtfully, and adjusting as needs change over time. This Strategic Plan reflects that same understanding. It is not a prescription, but a commitment to building an early learning and care system that grows alongside the children, families, and communities it serves.

Just as children develop through relationships, consistency, and care, strong early learning systems develop through trust, mutual responsibility, and ongoing learning. This plan brings together families, educators, providers, and partners to nurture an environment that children like [Mateo](#) can rely on—an environment where transitions are smoother, relationships are steadier, and support follows the child rather than expecting the child or family to navigate it alone.

Because this plan is a living document, it will be revisited regularly, allowing the system to reflect, learn, and adapt. Twice-yearly reviews provide opportunities to listen again to community voice, observe what is working, and make thoughtful adjustments. This ongoing cycle mirrors how caregivers support children: noticing progress, responding to challenges, and staying present as growth unfolds.

Most importantly, this plan centers the lived experiences of families and educators. It recognizes that communities already hold deep knowledge, strengths, and aspirations for their children. The role of this strategic plan is to create space for those strengths to flourish—by aligning systems, strengthening relationships, and ensuring early learning and care environments remain welcoming and responsive.

By tending to this work with intention and care, San Joaquin County commits to an early learning and care system that does more than function—it grows. One that evolves with its community, supports all children and lays a strong, lasting foundation for learning, connection, and well-being for years to come. Over the next five years, this commitment will be revisited through shared learning, community voice, and regular reflection so the system continues to grow alongside the families it serves.

Common Terms and Abbreviations

This section provides a quick reference to commonly used terms and abbreviations that appear throughout the plan. This list is included to support clarity and collective understanding for all readers. It is intended as a practical, working reference to help navigate the document with ease.

CDE: California Department of Education	Head Start: Federally funded early childhood program serving low-income families
CDSS: California Department of Social Services	
CQECC: Council for Quality Education and Care of Children	Mixed-Delivery System: A system that includes school-based, center-based, home-based, and community-based providers
CSCC: Children’s Services Coordinating Commission	SJCOE: San Joaquin County Office of Education
ECE: Early Childhood Education	TK: Transitional Kindergarten
EES: Early Education Services	UPK: Universal Pre-Kindergarten
ELC: Early Learning and Care	

Helpful Links

[Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment](#) - The *SJCOE Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment* presents data on early childhood care and education needs across San Joaquin County. This assessment combines demographic information, service availability, and local market conditions to highlight gaps in access and capacity — for example, how many infants and toddlers are served versus those who still need care, workforce conditions, and geographic access patterns. It also draws on broader state data and county population trends to show where unmet needs are largest and where strategic focus could drive the greatest impact. This source provided quantitative grounding for the plan’s priorities, helping connect community voice with objective measures of need.

[SJCOE Data Dashboard](#) - The SJCOE Data Dashboard is an interactive data resource developed as a result of the Early Learning and Care Needs Assessment. It provides summary data on early childhood and K–12 indicators, such as enrollment, developmental screening results, family demographics, school readiness measures, and other trends relevant to young learners. This dashboard helped the planning team understand where the county stands on key indicators and track changes over time. It served as a reference point for identifying disparities

and reinforcing findings from community engagement with current quantitative evidence. The dashboard is intended to support ongoing monitoring and planning beyond this strategic cycle.

[CSCC County Self Assessment](#) - Every five years, the Children's Services Coordinating Commission begins a new cycle of the California – Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR). This begins by completing a County Self-Assessment (CSA) and developing a System Improvement Plan (SIP). The CSA includes a comprehensive review of San Joaquin County's child abuse prevention efforts to determine the effectiveness of current practice, programs, and services and identify areas for targeted system improvement.

[California Department of Education](#) - State-level early education programs, guidance, data, and policy context illustrate current early learning priorities, funding structures, and quality standards across California.

[California Department of Social Services](#) - CDSS oversees local child care planning councils working to ensure high-quality child care is affordable and accessible to children of all ages, parents have the information they need to make sound choices and decisions about their child's education and care, and that community members work together to accomplish and maintain our vision for quality care and education for children. CQECC is the local planning council for San Joaquin County.