

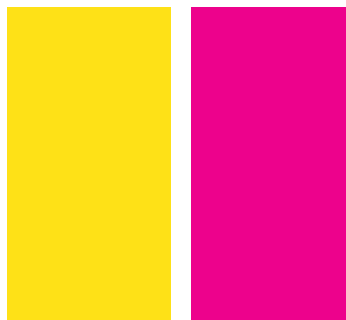
Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion Data on Support for Early Childhood Services



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PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH & STRATEGY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) is pleased to present this summary of key findings from recent survey research among California voters on subjects related to investment in early childhood. In assembling this analysis, FM3 reviewed polling data from 21 separate survey instruments – at both the state and local levels – on voter attitudes toward public support for early childhood services.

The primary focus of the analysis was to identify consistent threads in messaging on early childhood – much of it in the context of public finance ballot measures – but four broader trends in public opinion were evident in the data as well:

- 1. California voters value early childhood services and believe they need additional resources.** California voters understand that early childhood education is critical to helping children succeed in school, and is connected to positive long-term outcomes, including increases in college attendance and reductions in criminal activity. Voters also recognize that investments in health services for young children will facilitate their success in both preschool and K-12 education. Sizable majorities in every community polled perceive a need for additional funding for early childhood education.
- 2. At the same time, the issue lacks urgency when compared to K-12 education and other more prominent local concerns.** While the perception that early childhood education needs additional resources is widespread, voters consistently feel that this need for funding ranks lower than the need for funding for K-12 education. Early childhood services also lack urgency when compared to other pressing local issues like the cost of housing and homelessness. Additionally, while majorities of voters see a need to increase funding for early childhood services in principle, they are more tempered in their enthusiasm about specific proposed funding mechanisms.
- 3. While majorities of voters often back early childhood ballot measures, it is difficult to reach the two-thirds supermajority support required for passage of a special tax.** The modest urgency voters feel around the issue, despite a consensus around the need for more funding, leads to majorities of voters saying they would vote “yes” on a potential funding measure but (in most cases) fewer than two-thirds. The difficulty in consolidating this broader support – even when voters are exposed to arguments in favor of such ballot measures – has posed a significant barrier to their passage. Voters’ positive reaction to messaging and the issue, in general, suggest that with greater campaign resources and ability to reach voters, these measures will have greater chances at success.
- 4. However, there is encouragement in the emergence of new funding mechanisms capable of attracting substantial voter support.** Several recent polls have shown that taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages and marijuana cultivation or sales are capable of

drawing both broad and intense voter support. However, it must also be acknowledged that each also has the potential to generate substantial opposition that might not otherwise exist – particularly in the case of taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages, which have almost always generated substantial opposition campaign investment from the beverage industry.

In the face of these broad trends in public opinion, the following are key communications recommendations to emerge from the analysis:

Messaging Do's

- **DO focus on the critical role of the preschool years in children's brain development.** Messaging emphasizing the connection between early childhood education and children's rapid brain development before age five is among the most consistently effective arguments in favor of public investment in early childhood.
- **DO stress that early childhood education *strengthens* K-12 education.** Voters appreciate the importance K-12 education plays in a child's success in life, and most already understand the relationship between high-quality early education and school readiness. By reinforcing this connection, voters will be more likely to associate early childhood education with positive long-term life outcomes. This message also has the advantage of inoculating against objections that increased spending on pre-K competes with increased spending on K-12 education.
- **DO stress that early education provides more opportunities for parent engagement – and does not replace it.** Some voters express discomfort with the idea that investments in early childhood services relieve parents of their responsibility to provide various aspects of care for their children. Accordingly, many voters respond positively to messaging that emphasizes the role of early childhood services in helping, supporting, and guiding parents – and not replacing them.
- **DO emphasize the realities of rising costs for early childhood education and health, and the lack of opportunity that creates for children whose parents are having a hard time making ends meet.** At the same time that voters are conscious of rapidly rising costs for housing, healthcare, and food, they also perceive that child care and pre-K are becoming more expensive. They understand the pressure this puts on parents who want to take good care of their children but are struggling just to pay the bills – and the resulting need for public investment in early childhood services.
- **DO highlight equity concerns, including disparities between low-income and high-income children.** In numerous surveys, voters express a firm belief that it requires two incomes to raise a child, particularly in urban areas of California. Without affordable child care or early childhood education, many but the most affluent parents may have

difficulty both caring for their children and providing for them. Though most voters may not think much about the inherent inequities in being able to afford early childhood services, they are well aware of vast socioeconomic inequities in many other aspects of life in California – and messages which document these inequities draw a positive response.

- **DO appeal to a sense of shared responsibility for children and youth – and a belief that whole communities benefit from such investment.** Voters broadly agree that there is a responsibility among their entire community to ensure that its children grow up healthy and ready to learn – and they understand that the whole community will ultimately benefit from the long-term benefits of such investment: a more skilled workforce, lower crime rates, and improved public health.
- **DO focus on support for populations that voters most urgently want to help – such as homeless children.** While voters want to help and support all children, they acknowledge that homeless children, foster youth and other vulnerable populations need more urgent assistance. Emphasizing that early childhood services would target these groups helps to bolster support.
- **DO center messaging on the problems facing children and youth about which voters are most concerned – including child abuse and neglect.** In numerous surveys, concerns about child abuse and neglect (and to a lesser degree, hunger) stand out as those voters most urgently would like to see addressed.
- **DO focus on specific services for children and youth services that consistently poll well:**
 - ✓ Preventive health – both medical and dental;
 - ✓ Early literacy;
 - ✓ Mental health;
 - ✓ Bullying prevention;
 - ✓ For older youth, job training, after-school programming, and support that helps kids stay in school; and
 - ✓ Parental engagement efforts.
- **DO highlight the fiscal accountability provisions of ballot measures.** Sizable numbers of voters support investment in early childhood education, and yet have concerns or reservations about whether local public agencies can be trusted to spend the money effectively or as promised. For these voters, hearing about accountability mechanisms like required independent audits, full public disclosure of spending, or oversight by a committee of local citizens can be highly reassuring.

- **DO communicate a sense of urgency.** K-12 education and other top-of-mind issues like housing costs often seem much more urgent to voters than do early childhood issues, and have the potential to keep support for funding proposals from exceeding the required two-thirds level. Voters may feel that, relative to competing needs, investments in early childhood are more easily deferred to a future date. Accordingly, communications for specific funding proposals must stress the unique opportunity they present – and the severity of the problems that will emerge or persist if the opportunity is not seized.
- **DO emphasize the importance of investing in prevention.** Voters find it believable that early investments in education and health improve outcomes and keep youth out of trouble and in school – and they understand that it can be far less costly and far more impactful to prevent problems from arising for youth than to help them resolve those problems after those problems emerge.
- **DO highlight support from teachers, parents, public safety officials, doctors, and others with firsthand knowledge of kids’ needs.** Those who work firsthand with children are consistently seen as the most trustworthy messengers on this issue.
- **DO reinforce voters’ emotional connection with kids.** Ultimately, we do not need sophisticated opinion research tools to understand the deep emotional connection that most people feel for children. Messaging that contains an emotional component which builds upon and reinforces voters’ affection for children – through both words and images – will be much more effective.
- **DO identify and elevate success stories about early childhood services to create a broader understanding of what they are.** Part of the reason that K-12 education measures receive broader and stronger support is voters’ clear understanding of what K-12 education does. In contrast, early childhood services touch a smaller population, at an earlier part of their childhood, through a patchwork of different providers and with coverage that is far from universal. It will likely be helpful to identify compelling early childhood success stories that make providers and their work tangible and demonstrate their importance, and illustrate the benefits that will accrue from expanding and strengthening them.

Messaging Don’t’s

- **DO NOT neglect to emphasize the importance of early childhood health services along with early childhood education.** Voters understand that children who are sick or malnourished are less likely to reap the benefits of either early or K-12 education, and voice strong support for early childhood health programs like vaccinations, nutrition programs, and preventive health care. In many places, these services are viewed as co-equal priorities with early childhood education. Messaging should not neglect to highlight the importance of these services.

- **DO NOT lead communications with explanations of funding mechanisms or the mechanics of ballot proposals.** Messaging that goes into detail about the mechanics of how money will be raised and disbursed should be only used when necessary to respond to specific questions. In broad, pro-active communications, this messaging is neither compelling nor motivating for voters.
- **DO NOT rely heavily on solely economic rationales for investment in early childhood.** Voters understand that investment in early childhood health and education will yield more success in K-12 education; that more success in K-12 will yield higher rates of college enrollment and completion; and that those outcomes will yield a more skilled workforce that will boost economic activity and tax revenue. At the same time, those benefits are long-term, and reflect a dispassionate cost-benefit analysis that sidesteps the emotional connections that most make voters want to invest in early childhood programs. While this messaging is credible, it is typically less impactful than the other themes cited here.
- **DO NOT use jargon that is familiar to policymakers but not voters.** Describing programming in general terms, like “after-school programming for school-age children” or “child abuse prevention and education” is specific enough about the intent of the programming, without using terminology that voters may find hard to understand and unfamiliar. While terms like “Head Start,” “ELL,” “interventions,” or “school climate” are broadly used and familiar in the field, they may leave the average voter puzzled – particularly those without children.
- **DO NOT highlight the backing of elected officials, business, or labor organizations in isolation.** While voters don’t have particularly negative feelings toward any of these entities, they have an inherent skepticism about the political or economic motivations that may lie behind their endorsements or support. Their backing is best presented as part of a broader coalition.
- **DO NOT assume that early childhood ballot measures can win with a limited campaign.** Particularly when measures require a two-thirds vote, it is essential that voters be exposed to strong “yes” messaging from the campaign. In many cases, the ballot language and earned media alone will not be sufficient to generate two-thirds support. Generating adequate resources to communicate can often pose a greater obstacle than developing the right messaging.

The balance of this memo explores the data behind these and other findings in more detail.

I. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this analysis, FM3 reviewed existing public opinion data regarding California voters' attitudes toward early childhood education, health, and child care services; options for funding the expansion of such services; and messages making the case for increased investment in early childhood.

Data was drawn from statewide voter surveys, as well as surveys from individual California communities, conducted between 2014 and 2017. A full list of the sources consulted is provided below.

- **Alameda County**
 - June 2017 Polling Memo: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, June 5-7, 2017, 500 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.4% margin of error

- **State of California**
 - July 2017 Survey Messaging Highlights: Tulchin Research, 800 voters, +/-3.5% margin of error
 - October 2017 Campaign Presentation: Silicon Valley Community Foundation
 - September 2017 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, September 5-12, 2017, 898 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-3.5% margin of error
 - August 2016 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, May 31-August 8, 2016, 640 parents of children under age 5, online, landline and cellphone, +/-3.9% margin of error

- **Los Angeles County**
 - July 2015 Presentation: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, July 2015, 1,298 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-2.8% margin of error

- **Marin County**
 - June 2014 Survey: Godbe Research, June 13-23, 2014, n=604, +/-4.0% margin of error
 - March 2016 Survey: Godbe Research, March 12-21, 2016, n=620, online, landline and cellphone, +/-4.0% margin of error

- **Napa County**
 - November 2015 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, October 28 – November 3, 2015, 401 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.9% margin of error

- **City of Oakland**
 - July 2017 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, July 13-19, 2017, 551 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.2% margin of error

- **City of Richmond**
 - December 2015 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, December 10-21, 2015, 400 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.9% margin of error

- **City of Sacramento**
 - June 2015 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, June 14-18, 2015, 600 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.0% margin of error
 - March 2016 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, March 3-6, 2016, 400 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.9% margin of error

- **San Joaquin County**
 - February 2016 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, February 3 –7, 2016, 410 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.8% margin of error
 - November 2017 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, November 2 –7, 2017, 400 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.9% margin of error

- **San Mateo County**
 - February 2016 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, February 22-28, 2016, 600 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.0% margin of error

- **Santa Clara County**
 - January 2014 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, January 21-February 9, 2014, 802 voters (401 voters, 401 residents), landline and cellphone, +/-3.5% margin of error
 - July 2015 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, July 6-9, 2015, 712 voters (400 countywide), landline and cellphone, +/-4.9% margin of error

- **Solano County**
 - September 2014 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, September 23-28, 2014, 600 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.0% margin of error

- **Sonoma County**
 - March 2016 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, March 5-8, 2016, 603 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.0% margin of error
 - May 2016 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, May 16-22, 2016, 450 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.6% margin of error

- **Yolo County**
 - May 2016 Survey: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates, May 12-15, 2016, 400 voters, landline and cellphone, +/-4.9% margin of error

Note that we did not have complete access to all of the data in each of the studies listed; in some cases, only select question data was shared by the sponsors of the study.

Our analysis of the specific findings of these studies is informed by a wide range of other research FM3 has conducted on these issues outside of California – ranging from statewide polls in places like Arizona and Hawaii to surveys on specific funding measures in communities as diverse as San Antonio and Portland, in addition to national research for the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The broad trends we identify here

are consistent with those we have observed in research outside California, as well as within it.

The following analysis includes two main sections. The first section explores broad voter attitudes toward early childhood programs and proposals to fund their expansion. The second section focuses on messaging aimed at encouraging voters to support increased investments in early childhood programming.

II. VOTER ATTITUDES TOWARD EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

The following are key trends in voter attitudes toward early childhood programs that cut across nearly all of the studies.

- **California voters firmly believe that investment in early childhood helps children succeed in school and later in life.** Voters understand that access to early childhood education prepares students for school, and the polling data suggests that they recognize the importance of early success in school in determining other long-term outcomes, such as higher rates of college attendance and reduced involvement with the criminal justice system.
 - ✓ Three-quarters of voters statewide think early childhood education serving children from birth to age five is effective in preparing children for school. (FM3, California, September 2017)
 - ✓ A survey of Sonoma County voters in 2016 found that 79 percent of voters agreed more children would enter kindergarten ready to learn if they had access to preschool, 74 percent thought more students would graduate from high school and enter college and 70 percent believed gaps in achievement for low-income students would be reduced. Seventy-seven percent of parents under age 5 agree that the quality of their child’s preschool will have an impact on their success in life and 56 percent say it will have a “major impact.” (FM3, Sonoma County, March 2016)
- **At the same time, voters usually prioritize improving K-12 education over improving early childhood education.** Voters across California are likely to see the quality of public K-12 education as a more serious problem, and addressing it as a higher priority, than early childhood education.
 - ✓ For example, in a statewide survey of voters in 2017, 53 percent of voters said there was a “great need” for funding to improve K-12 schools and 79 percent said there was at least “some” need, compared to 44 percent who believed there was a “great need” for funding to improve access to early childhood education and 72 percent who said there was at least “some need.” (FM3, California, September 2017)
 - ✓ In Santa Clara County in 2015, 51 percent of voters said there was a “great need” for funding for local public schools, while 43 percent saw a “great need” for funding for childcare programs. (FM3, Santa Clara County, July 2015)
 - ✓ A similar trend was observable among Napa County voters in 2015, where 37 percent felt there was a “great need” for funding for local schools and only 32 percent said the same for childcare programs. (FM3, Napa County, November 2015)

While sizable majorities of voters generally favor improvements to education at all levels, public K-12 education tends to rank higher than early childhood education among voters' priorities.

- **Many parents of children under age five acknowledge that paying for early childhood education presents a significant financial burden; however, voters do not tend to perceive it as one.** While parents tend to have high awareness of this problem, there is little evidence that voters, more broadly, comprehend the financial impact of rising preschool and childcare costs.
 - ✓ Among parents who pay for childcare and/or preschool 49 percent call it a “major” financial burden; 49 percent say they pay more than they expected before having children and 52 percent say that paying for childcare and/or preschool places a financial strain on them and their families. (FM3, California, August 2016)
 - ✓ In Sonoma County, only 39 percent of voters say that “the cost of childcare” is a “very serious” problem in their community. Women, regardless of whether they are mothers or not, are much more likely than others to perceive the cost of childcare as a problem; however, even among women only 46 percent call the problem “very serious.” (FM3, Sonoma County, March 2016)
- **California voters see a need for additional resources for early childhood services.** The data is consistent in showing that the public perceives a significant need for additional funding for early childhood services.
 - ✓ In a 2017 statewide poll, 72 percent indicated that they felt there was at least “some” need for funding for early childhood education and 44 percent perceived a “great need.” (FM3, California, September 2017)
 - ✓ In a 2016 survey of parents of children under age five, 63 percent of parents said they felt the State of California should be doing more to provide opportunities for young children to attend preschool and 45 percent said the State should be doing much more (FM3, California, August 2016).
- **Early childhood funding ballot measures regularly receive majority support across California; however, they often struggle to reach the two-thirds threshold required for passage.** The table below shows the level of support for the funding measures tested in the survey instruments included in this analysis. While the measures reach majority support everywhere, they only exceed two-thirds in a handful of very progressive communities. Even in communities that are supportive of investments in early childhood and reached two-thirds in their polling (such as Marin) measures that require supermajority support are vulnerable to negative messaging and/or to the impact of a more conservative voter turnout.

**Table 1:
Comparison of Pre-Election Polling and Election Outcomes
on Recent Early Childhood Measures**

(Note that in some cases the ballot language tested in the polling did not match the actual ballot language adopted)

Location	Poll Date	Initial Support in Poll	Election Date	Election Outcome
San Joaquin County	November 2017	57%	November 2018	TBD
California	September 2017	67%	N/A	N/A
City of Oakland	July 2017	86%	Planned for 2018	TBD
Alameda County	June 2017	73%	Planned for 2018	TBD
Yolo County	May 2016	64%	N/A	N/A
Sonoma County	May 2016	64%	N/A	N/A
City of Sacramento	March 2016	61%	June 2016	66%
Marin County	March 2016	69%	November 2016	63%
San Mateo County	February 2016	77%	N/A	N/A
City of Richmond	December 2015	84%	N/A	N/A
Napa County	November 2015	51%	June 2016	54%
Santa Clara County	July 2015	63%	N/A	N/A
Solano County	September 2014	68%	November 2016	54%

- **The difficulty in reaching two-thirds supermajority support often stems from limited campaign funding.** The research analyzed in this report, along with FM3’s own campaign experience in other states, indicates that in many cases the only path to generating two-thirds support for early childhood measures comes from exposing voters to strong “yes” messaging. Unfortunately, in practice many early childhood measures lack the funding to drive that messaging to large groups of voters – which means they remain heavily reliant on the ballot language, which often is not enough to achieve two-thirds support. In many cases, the question is less one of having the right messaging than of having the resources to communicate that message broadly.
- **Relatively few voters rank specific funding areas from early childhood measures as “extremely important.”** Individual spending priorities for early childhood services vary widely from community to community. However, consistent across the research is evidence that few of these spending areas are seen as urgent needs. Majorities of voters consistently say these are “very important” spending priorities, but rarely do more than one-third consider any individual investment area “extremely important.”

Among the surveys where spending priorities were tested in this manner, approximately two in five items were rated as “extremely important” by one-third or more of local voters. In some communities, the proportion is much lower; for example, in Sacramento only one out of 19 potential spending areas tested in the survey met this criterion. Voters in more progressive communities that are pre-disposed to support a funding measure

children and youth, like Alameda County and the City of Richmond, are more likely to rate specific funding areas as being highly important.

- **Voters find more narrowly-targeted funding mechanisms, such as taxes on marijuana cultivation or the distribution of sugar-sweetened beverages, appealing.** Across a range of surveys, taxes that apply to narrower segments of the population – such as sugar-sweetened beverage drinkers or marijuana users or businesses – obtain relatively high levels of support. Taxes that apply to broader segments of the population - like sales or property taxes – do not fare as well.
 - ✓ Sixty-four percent of Santa Clara County voters said they would be willing to support a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages; and 68 percent of parents of children under age 5 would support a tobacco or sugar-sweetened beverage tax. (FM3, Santa Clara County, July 2015)
 - ✓ Fifty-three percent of Napa County voters were willing to support a sugar-sweetened beverage tax, which was higher than their willingness to support any other funding mechanism for an early childhood measure. (FM3, Napa County, November 2015)
 - ✓ Fifty-seven percent of San Joaquin County voters are willing to support a tax on cannabis cultivation in order to fund early childhood education programs, public health programs, substance abuse prevention and public safety. (FM3, San Joaquin County, November 2017)
 - ✓ Sixty-one percent of Sacramento voters were willing to support a tax on marijuana cultivation and manufacturing to finance children and youth services- and ultimately, 66 percent voted for it. (FM3, City of Sacramento, March 2016)

The risk of pursuing these types of funding mechanisms is that they can elicit more direct and intense opposition than more broad-based funding mechanisms, like a sales or property tax. With these more broad-based forms of taxation, there is rarely well-funded or organized opposition to a local ballot measure.

However, proposed taxes on marijuana or sugar-sweetened beverages generate entirely different kinds of opposition. In the case of marijuana, opposition to recreational marijuana sales can morph into opposition to a proposal to tax it, a dynamic that was evident for a small but consequential number of voters with the City of Sacramento’s June 2016 ballot measure – and which is also evident in early polling in San Joaquin County. In the case of sugar-sweetened beverage taxes, the beverage industry typically invests in intensive and well-organized opposition campaigns. These additional political challenges entailed by these funding mechanisms should not preclude their consideration, but must be carefully evaluated as part of any decision to move forward with them.

- **Voters generally want to limit elected officials’ discretion in allocating funds, to ensure that children will benefit.** When given the opportunity to indicate whether they prefer that a group of elected officials be able to use their discretion in the allocation of funding for early childhood versus the allocation be pre-determined by policy, voters are likely to choose the latter option. For example, when presented with this choice, a majority of San Joaquin County voters this year favored prescribing the funding allocations (53%) while only one-third wanted to leave this power to their Board of Supervisors (FM3, San Joaquin County, November 2017). As public trust in government at all levels has declined over the past several decades, we see more and more voters calling for higher standards of transparency and accountability with local public finance measures, including those that invest in early childhood.
- **The demographic profile of voters likely to back an early childhood education funding measure is relatively well-defined.** The strongest supporters of early childhood funding measures tend to fit a progressive voter profile; they are often registered Democrats, voters of color, women, highly-educated, and under age 50. Opponents tend to be Republican, ideologically conservative, older, and are more likely to be male. The table below illustrates some of the typical demographic characteristics of supporters, swing voters, and opponents of early childhood funding measures.

**Table 2:
Typical Demographic Profile of Supporters, Opponents, and Swing Voters on
Early Childhood Ballot Measures**

Supporters	Swing	Opponents
Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Ages 18-49	Women with no children	Men Ages 50+
Women	Women ages 50+	Non-Parents
Parents	Republican women	Ideologically conservative
Ideologically progressive and/or liberal	Ideologically moderate	Ages 65+

The positions of communities of color and lower-income households tend to vary by community. In some locations they are part of the coalition of base supporters, while in others they may emerge as swing voters.

Supporters of early childhood measures generally come from groups whose turnout is far less certain, and who may vote regularly in Presidential elections but not as often in primaries or off-year elections. Opponents, in contrast, tend to come from high-turnout segments of the electorate. While a myriad of factors affecting the context of a finance measure are important to consider when deciding whether to move forward in a given community, these demographic profiles indicate that – all else equal – higher-turnout elections are likely to be more beneficial for early childhood measures.

III. MESSAGING

The following are consistent messaging findings to emerge from the research:

- **A range of specific early childhood investments consistently test as higher priorities.** When voters are asked to rank specific priorities for early childhood investments, several consistently emerge as most highly-valued. These include:
 1. **Preventive health.** Voters find investment in preventive health for children, both medical and dental, to be highly appealing.
 - ✓ Seventy-five percent of San Mateo voters felt that it was “extremely” or “very important” that a preschool program conduct a screening of each child to identify possible developmental delays, disabilities, or other special needs. (FM3, San Mateo County, February 2016)
 - ✓ Two-thirds of Sonoma County voters believed it was very important to use measure funds for “providing regular dental health checkups for children.” (FM3, Sonoma County, March 2016)
 - ✓ Eighty-four percent of voters in Richmond felt it was “very important” to provide “preventive health care to keep children and young people from getting sick.” (FM3, City of Richmond, December 2015)
 2. **Literacy.** Voters appreciate the connection between early literacy and success in school.
 - ✓ Seventy-one percent of San Joaquin County voters view “expanding childhood literacy and reading programs as “extremely” or “very important.” (FM3, San Joaquin County, November 2017)
 - ✓ Eighty-eight percent of Oakland voters think making sure children are reading at grade level is a “very important” objective of expanding access to preschool. (FM3, City of Oakland, July 2017)
 3. **Mental health.** Voters value providing mental health support for children. There is a widespread perception that our society under-invests in mental health at all age levels, and voters are particularly interested in ensuring that children who face challenges like homelessness and neglect have access to these resources.
 - ✓ Sixty-four percent of Santa Clara County voters think it is “very important” to expand “mental health treatment for children and youth.” (FM3, Santa Clara County, July 2015)

- ✓ Seventy-seven percent of San Joaquin voters believe it is “very important” to help “trauma-exposed children and youth with supportive services” and 75 percent say the same for “expanding mental health treatment for children and youth.” (FM3, San Joaquin County, February 2016)
 - ✓ Eighty-five percent of Santa Clara County voters believe it is important for preschool programs to promote “positive social and emotional development.” (FM3, Santa Clara County, January 2014)
4. **Bullying prevention.** As bullying has become a more visible issue in schools, voters increasingly value interventions that prevent bullying.
- ✓ Sixty-one percent of Solano County voters think “bullying prevention and education” programs are “very important” (FM3, Solano County, September 2014).
 - ✓ Seventy-seven percent of Richmond voters value “providing conflict resolution programs for youth.” (FM3, City of Richmond, December 2015)
5. **Job training and after-school programing for older youth.** Voters understand that after-school activities and job training help keep children and youth out of trouble when they are not in school.
- ✓ Two-thirds of Sacramento County voters think job training programs for youth ages 14 to 24 are “very important” investments. (FM3, City of Sacramento, June 2015)
 - ✓ Eighty-three percent of Richmond voters think “providing youth job training programs is “very important” and eighty-four percent say the same for “helping at-risk youth get and keep a job.” Seventy-eight percent of Richmond voters value “offering after-school programs for school-age children.” (FM3, City of Richmond, December 2015)
 - ✓ Nearly seven in ten San Joaquin voters hold a similar view about the importance of “providing after-school programs.” (FM3, San Joaquin County, February 2016)
6. **Providing support that helps kids stay in school.** Programs that help children facing obstacles to success stay in school are often a high priority.
- ✓ Eighty-one percent of Santa Clara County voters perceived “helping homeless children and teens stay in school” as “very important.” (FM3, Santa Clara County, July 2015)

- ✓ Seventy-one percent of Napa County voters held the same view. (FM3, Napa County, November 2015)

7. Supporting parent engagement in their children’s development and education.

Not surprisingly, voters believe that parents have the primary responsibility for ensuring their children’s healthy development and academic success. Services that emphasize parental engagement are valued, and help mitigate criticisms of “nanny state” overreach from expanded publicly-funded early childhood services.

- ✓ Eighty-six percent of San Mateo County voters perceive helping “parents understand what they can do to support their children’s education” as “very important.” (FM3, San Mateo County, February 2016)
- ✓ Sixty-two percent of Sonoma County voters think “expanding parent education and support programs” is “very important.” (FM3, Sonoma County, March 2016)
- ✓ Two-thirds of San Joaquin County voters think it is important to help “young parents learn about infant and toddler’s development and needs.” (FM3, San Joaquin County, February 2016)

• **Three core messages consistently stand out as strong arguments for investment in early childhood programs.**

- ✓ A message describing the critical ***brain development*** that children undergo before age five is frequently rated as convincing, both in statewide polls and local ones.

Research shows that 90 percent of a child’s brain development occurs before age five. These critical years lay the foundation for the rest of a child’s life. By expanding access to quality preschool, we can help ensure that every child in Oakland gets off to a strong start. (FM3, Oakland, July 2017)

The key to this message is not simply that it provides a compelling statistic about child development; more importantly, that statistic validates and re-affirms observations voters have made in their own lives. In focus groups, voters consistently talk about how young children are “like sponges,” constantly absorbing knowledge and behaviors from those around them. The survey data reflects this as well; voters agree that the most growth happens in those first years (for example, 72% of voters in Sonoma County say that birth to age three or ages four to five are the most important years in a child’s development).

- ✓ A second compelling message argues that early childhood education increases students’ ***school readiness***. This message is effective both when framed either as an

opportunity to improve student outcomes, or as a way to help ensure that investments in K-12 public education will be effective in producing results. This message builds on voters' understanding that early childhood education has a persistent benefit in preparing children to learn, and on the high value that voters place on K-12 education.

By increasing access to quality preschool programs, this measure strengthens K through 12 education. Studies show that kids who go to high quality preschool are more likely to read proficiently by the third grade, and more likely to graduate and go on to college. (FM3, Yolo County, May 2016)

Experts say that children who attend preschool do better in K-12. They outperform other students in math and English, and are more likely to attend college. High-quality, publicly funded preschool and early education programs set up our children for a brighter future, giving them the best shot at success. (Tulchin, California, July 2017)

- ✓ Messages describing the positive health outcomes of investing in early childhood also resonate with voters. Voters respond positively to messages describing benefits to children's physical and mental health from investments in early childhood.

Preschool and other early childhood development programs give our kids the social and emotional skills they require for a lifetime. This means learning how to work well with others and being able to face tough situations. A lack of such skills can often lead to depression or isolation. We must give our children the tools they need to successfully handle life's ups and downs. (Tulchin, California, July 2017)

One appealing aspect of health-focused messaging is that it leverages voter support for the concept of prevention; voters understand that providing support for children's health when they are young can prevent the emergence of problems that are more costly, and more damaging, later in their lives.

- **Messages highlighting the ways that early childhood programs facilitate parental engagement are also highly effective.** Voters respond well to messaging that emphasizes that investments in early childhood programs complement – rather than replace – parents' efforts in the home. A common conservative objection to early childhood investments is that it is the parents' role to care for and educate young children, and that the government should not be absolving them of that responsibility. Arguments describing how early childhood programs support, reinforce, and strengthen parents' engagement with the children provide an implicit answer to these criticisms.

The most important factor in helping kids succeed in school is getting their parents involved. That's why this measure requires parents to actively participate in their kids' education, from preschool through graduation – by bringing kids to school on-time and ensuring they have excellent attendance; participating in school activities; and reading to kids at home. (FM3, Solano County, September 2014)

- **At a time of rising income inequality in California, messages stressing the ways that investment in early childhood promote more equitable access to key services are well received.** While there is some variation by community, voters react sympathetically to messages focus on giving low-income children access to services they disproportionately lack. These messages appear to be gaining in salience, at least in areas with a high cost of living like the Bay Area. For example, in Solano County, 86 percent of respondents agreed that “it would be nice if one parent could stay home when children are young, but nowadays it takes two incomes to have enough money to raise a child” (2015).

Preschool should not be a luxury only available to a few families. In Sonoma County, the cost of sending a child to preschool is nearly thirteen thousand dollars per year – that’s 39 percent of the median annual income for Sonoma County women. This measure will make early education available and affordable to families of all incomes, including middle-class families. (FM3, Sonoma County, March 2016)

Nearly 20 percent of Oakland residents live at or below the poverty line, and currently, there are over two thousand babies born into poverty in Oakland every year. This proposal gives Oakland a chance to interrupt the cycle of intergenerational poverty for many of its poorest kids, investing in our future workforce of entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, artists, and computer programmers. (FM3, City of Oakland, July 2017)

- **At the same time, when presented the choice on whether a program should target low-income families versus serving the entire community, voters consistently favor serving the whole community.** This trend was observed even in very progressive communities, such as Oakland. A potential driver of this pattern is the universal sense in California that the cost of living is rising, and that middle-income families are also struggling to make ends meet.
 - ✓ For example, 65 percent of voters in Oakland (one of the most intensely progressive communities polled) said they would prefer the City expand access to preschool for all Oakland children, rather than only to low-income children. (FM3, City of Oakland, July 2017)
 - ✓ Additionally, when Santa Clara County voters were asked how they’d prefer a preschool program be designed, a plurality said they would like to see if “subsidized to make programs more affordable for all families, based on a sliding income scale” rather than free or subsidized only for low- and middle-income families. (FM3, Santa Clara County, July 2015)
 - ✓ Forty-six percent of Los Angeles County voters preferred making “services available to three- and four-year-old children from all income groups” compared to 33 percent who favored making “services available to very low-income children from birth to age five.” (FM3, Los Angeles County, July 2015)

- **Messaging that connects early childhood education to positive long-term outcomes, such as improved performance in school and reduced crime rates, resonates with voters if framed correctly.** When the message is structured to lay out a clear causal chain – that early childhood education leads to improved performance in school, which in turn improves longer-term outcomes for young people and their communities – it is more believable than when the message simply asserts that investing in early childhood education will reduce crime or strengthen the local economy. The most convincing messages on long-term outcomes, shown below, not only establish this causal chain but also include statistical information and credible validators, both of which also strengthen the message.

Supporting the healthy development of our young children leads to safer communities. Police chiefs say children who attend preschool are more likely to stay in school and out of trouble. A child without an early education is 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime. Meanwhile, California taxpayers spend \$62,000 a year just to keep one inmate in prison – but educating a child in high quality publicly funded preschool would cost only a fraction of that. (Tulchin, California, July 2017)

Police chiefs say that children who attend quality early childhood education programs are more likely to stay in school, not get involved with crime, drugs and gangs, and stay out of jail. In fact, a long-term study found that children who did not participate in a preschool program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18. (FM3, California, September 2017)

For comparison, below is a message describing long-term outcomes that was less effective:

Children who miss out on early education are 70 percent more likely to commit violent crime later in life, and are more likely to drop out of school and develop drug and alcohol problems. But children that go to preschool are more likely to attend college and earn higher incomes. This measure will put Sonoma County kids on a better path. (FM3, Sonoma County, March 2016)

- **Messages that focus on the process of how funds for early childhood will be raised or distributed are generally less effective.** These types of messages should only be used as responses to specific questions or concerns about the mechanics of an early childhood program, usually before informed audiences like those at a community forum or at a newspaper editorial board. In general, they should not be a central focus of proactive, broad-based public communications.

Examples of less effective messages along these lines follow:

Napa kids make up 22 percent of the population, but only eight percent of the County budget goes to services that meet the needs of children and youth. This measure will

ensure that youth programs get their fair share of funding to serve our community's children. (FM3, Napa County, November 2015)

Currently, only one percent of the City of Sacramento's budget is spent on services for children and youth. This measure will increase that amount, helping ensure that Sacramento kids get the support they need. (FM3, City of Sacramento, March 2016)

The local marijuana industry views this measure as responsible and fair, and has offered its support. Not only will it benefit youth in the Sacramento community, but marijuana dispensaries say it will not interfere with their ability to serve local patients. (FM3, City of Sacramento, March 2016)

- Arguments describing a measure's **fiscal accountability requirements** are rarely rated as highly as ones describing the benefits of investing in children, but still have an important role to play. We have found in campaign environments that these arguments play an important role in inoculating against concerns about potential waste, particularly among conservative voters, and in addressing the growing sense of distrust towards government among all voters. When asked about a series of accountability requirements, majorities of Sacramento voters indicated that these would make them more likely to support a proposed children's measure. The table below shows the top accountability provisions from the 2016 Sacramento survey.

**Table 3:
Impact of Accountability Provisions on Voter Likelihood to Support
An Early Childhood Measure in Sacramento**

Accountability Provision	% More Likely
Requiring funded programs to meet established quality standards every year	73%
Subjecting all expenditures to independent financial audits	69%
Requiring that a portion be dedicated to services for homeless and foster children	68%
Requiring that all funds be dedicated to children and youth services	66%
Subjecting all revenue and expenditures to review by a citizens' oversight committee	65%

In essence, these provisions offer reasons not to vote “no,” as opposed to reasons to vote “yes” – but they still may be helpful as supporting, rather than lead, messages (as articulated below).

This measure has strong accountability requirements to ensure that funds are spent efficiently and as promised to voters. It requires citizens' oversight of all spending, annual independent financial and performance audits, and requires that early childhood

education programs meet state and local standards for quality and safety in order to receive funding. (FM3, California, September 2017)

- **Helping children and youth who are experiencing homelessness is emerging as a top priority.** As homelessness is on the rise and increasingly visible in California, so is voters’ desire to prioritize services for homeless children. Offering services for this population is consistently rated among voters’ top priorities, when tested.

- ✓ It was the top-scoring message in a 2016 survey of Sacramento voters shown below:

Due to a lack of funding, Sacramento’s only shelter for homeless youth was recently forced to close its doors, displacing a number of youths between the ages of 12 and 18. This measure will help ensure that homeless City youth are not forced to sleep on the street. (42% very convincing, City of Sacramento, 2016)

- ✓ In a 2016 survey of San Joaquin County voters, 88 percent agreed that “helping homeless children and teens stay in school” was “extremely” or “very important.”
 - ✓ Fifty-one percent of Sonoma County voters agreed that “helping children under five whose families are homeless” is “extremely important” and 76 percent said it was at least “very important.”
- **Voters also prioritize helping youth who face other specific challenges, including foster children and youth and those experiencing poverty.** Voters are generally willing to offer support for children and youth who face specific challenges, whether it is having been a part of the foster care system or having faced poverty. A 2015 survey of voters in the City of Richmond asked voters to rank different groups of children and youth, inclusive of all ages, in terms of priority for services. Those who were ranked most frequently as “one of the highest” priorities are shown in the table below.

**Table 4:
Priority Assigned to Helping Various Groups of Children and Youth in the City of Richmond**

Group	% “One of the Highest Priorities”
Youth with poor mental health	43%
Youth involved in the juvenile justice system	43%
Youth living in poverty	42%
Foster children and youth	36%
Teen parents and families	35%
Homeless children	33%

- Messengers who have first-hand experience with kids and understand their needs have a high degree of credibility.** Voters are most likely to trust local educators, police, and nurses and doctors on the needs of young children and the issue of investing in this area. As shown in the table below, voters trust those who have frequent and direct contact with children in some supportive capacity. They tend to see elected officials and business organizations as least trustworthy. The political or business-oriented motives they associate with these messengers do not elicit trust when it comes to children’s issues.

**Table 5:
Credibility of Messengers on Youth Issues in the City of Sacramento**

Messenger	% Trust
Teachers in K-12 schools	72%
Local police officers	70%
Early child education advocates	63%
Local school principals	63%
Parents of young children	58%
Homeless advocates	56%
The Sacramento Bee newspaper	51%
The Sacramento City Unified School District Board	50%
The Sacramento City Council	49%
A leader in your religious community	48%
Local business leaders	47%
Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson	46%
The Sacramento Youth Commission	40%
The Sacramento Association of Realtors	26%

- Research should focus on identifying and highlighting compelling success stories about early childhood services.** Part of the reason that K-12 education measures receive broader and stronger support is voters’ clear understanding of what K-12 education does. K-12 schools are highly visible parts of the community, and every voter recalls their own K-12 experience. Even those without school-aged children understand the role and value of K-12 education. In contrast, early childhood services touch a smaller population, at an earlier part of their childhood, through a patchwork of different providers and with coverage that is far from universal. Accordingly, voters may not have a clear mental picture of what early childhood services are, or how further investment would benefit kids or the community.

For all of these reasons, it will likely be important to identify compelling early childhood success stories – ones which make providers and their work seem tangible, demonstrate their importance, and illustrate the benefits that will accrue from expanding and

strengthening them. Doing a better job of telling those stories – both during and outside of campaign communications – could yield significant benefits.

In closing, it should be noted that while the message trends reported here should provide helpful broad guidance for communication on investments in early childhood, they cannot substitute for specific local opinion research on individual ballot measures or legislative proposals. While it may sound like a cliché, every California community is different and the social, political, and economic context around public investments in early childhood is changing rapidly. These recommendations should provide a solid basis to *begin* planning for communications efforts in individual California communities, but – ideally – fresh local opinion research should guide the *completion* of those plans.

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