Children growing up in Fresno live in one of the nation’s largest agricultural economies, yet this urban area suffers from high unemployment and rising economic insecurity. The school district serves a rich population of immigrant students—diverse Asian communities, including a large Hmong population, and a diverse Latino community. Educators, leaders, and community members have developed some exciting new models and partnerships. They are looking carefully at improving the quality of programs for young children (especially for children who are dual language learners) by supporting the adults who interact with young children in Fresno every day.
WHO ARE FRESNO’S YOUNG CHILDREN?

45% The share of children in Fresno’s highest poverty neighborhoods who are not ready for kindergarten*

25% Children in Fresno who are not ready for kindergarten.*

47% Children [ages 0–5] in the city of Fresno living in poverty

88% Children in FUSD who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch

33% Share of FUSD kindergarteners who are dual language learners

70.3% Spanish

20.5% Hmong

2.8% Khmer

2.6% Lao

3.8% Other

*Spiritual for kindergarten is defined here as being developmentally vulnerable on at least one domain of the Early Development Instrument, a population measure of young children’s health, development, and school readiness.

SUPPORTING ADULTS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN

New investments to improve kindergarten readiness across the city:

School district initial $7.4 million in 2011, plus ongoing investments

$3.3 million from David & Lucile Packard Foundation since 2015

New pre-K classrooms, expansion of transitional kindergarten

Training for all adults who work with young children

Collaboration and coordination between community partners, public agencies, and the school district

Sources: California Department of Education, U.S. Census, Fresno Unified School District
The Fresno Language Project is one example. The program aims to improve training for educators to better support young dual language learners by:

- Valuing home language and cultural diversity
- Employing instructional strategies to support language learning
- Providing site-based coaching
- Encouraging parent reinforcement of concepts at home

**Results:**

- Improvement of teachers’ use of language project strategies at circle time: 57% in Year 1 and 84% in Year 2
- Improvement in kindergartners who meet English Language Proficiency Criterion: 12%

A grant from the California Department of Education will enable Fresno to share the Fresno Language Project model with others working with young children in the Central Valley and to conduct trainer of trainer institutes statewide.

**Recent Statewide Reforms for Young Learners**

- $5 million to train early educators to work with dual language learners
- $5 million to increase the number of bilingual TK–12 teachers
- Annual grants to school districts to expand dual language immersion
- Stipends for training in early childhood for new transitional kindergarten teachers

“Our teachers and family care providers have been incredibly enthusiastic. It’s been transformational for our sites.”

— Anna Arambula, coach, Fresno Language Project
Looking Ahead

Fresno has made important investments that have already begun to bear fruit. The new collaborations taking place and models that are being built in the city are driving important shifts in culture. School district administrators report a changing mindset around early childhood inside Fresno Unified, with responsibility for young children’s well-being no longer being perceived as centered only in the preschool office. The community is working together to build a comprehensive system that responds to the needs of all of its children. The challenge now is how to scale reforms up so they make a real difference for all the children in the region.

“We’re on the road here toward real, lasting change. We’re testing it out, and we’re closer than we’ve ever been.”

– Deanna Mathies, executive officer of Early Learning, Fresno Unified School District