



Reclaim. Repurpose. Reimagine.

Turning a Shuttered
School Site Into an
Innovative Childcare
Center



Early
Learning



Family
Services



Community
Resources





Introduction

This guidebook is a blueprint for possibility. It tells the story of how First 5 Solano and Child Start, Inc. transformed a shuttered elementary school into a vibrant early education and community resource center through an innovative model. It will share how the concept was conceived, the partnerships that made it possible, the steps taken and considerations made, and the outcomes it aims to achieve for early educators, children, and families.

This guidebook provides practical insights and strategic guidance on navigating complex systems, building coalitions, and driving innovative solutions to address the persistent lack of childcare access. It serves as a roadmap for those willing to take bold action to meet the needs of children and families by reimagining underutilized public assets for a greater community purpose.

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While this project is innovative, innovation was not the goal....responsibility was. When our children's needs go unmet, we must rethink what's possible, reimagine what exists, and act with urgency and purpose.

- Michele Harris, *Executive Director*
First 5 Solano Children and Families Commission

About the Author



This guidebook was designed with deep intentionality and dedication by Michele Harris, Executive Director of the First 5 Solano Children and Families Commission. Coming from a family of public servants, Michele has felt a lifelong calling to serve children and families. Early in her career, she explored paths in teaching and child psychology, experiences that deepened both her commitment to children and her understanding of where her unique strengths could create the greatest impact. Over time, she discovered that her most powerful contribution lay not in direct service, but in crafting policy and leading systems-level change through strategic, collaborative leadership.

With more than two decades of experience in early childhood policy, program administration, and community partnership, Michele leads countywide efforts to ensure that all Solano County children enter school healthy, nurtured, and ready to learn. Under her leadership, First 5 Solano has strengthened its role as both a funder and a systems leader, advancing early learning, family support, and behavioral health initiatives that create lasting impact for children ages 0–5 and their families.

Throughout her tenure, she has championed innovative programs and cross-sector partnerships, approaching her work with a deep sense of responsibility and a belief that lasting change requires both thoughtful investment and decisive action. She is widely recognized for her collaborative leadership style, fiscal stewardship, and commitment to advancing racial and geographic equity in public service delivery.

The Rise Vallejo Early Education and Community Resource Center stands as a testament to her vision. It is an outcome of collective investment, strong partnerships, and unwavering dedication to children and families in the Solano County. Michele and her team are committed to sharing this model as a way to address persistent gaps in childcare access and provider capacity.

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Background

In 2020, First 5 Solano was approached by their County Administrator with a request. The long-standing county facility leased to local Child Start to run two Head Start classrooms was slated to be demolished and turned into additional parking for the neighboring County Facility. Child Start had been searching for a suitable site to house its classrooms for over 10 years. When the County Administrator approached First 5 Solano, it was to gauge whether First 5 Solano could leverage its connections and partnerships to assist with the search.

After discussing with Child Start, First 5 Solano began contacting professionals in the community, including a real estate agent, the City, and even their local recreation agency. They asked each group if they had available space to house two classrooms. This initial attempt revealed no suitable options, prompting the team to think outside of the box. They considered their network and pre-established relationships in the community. With a member of their commission being the County Superintendent of schools, First 5 Solano entered into conversations with her regarding the possibility of approaching the Vallejo City Unified School District Superintendent to ask about available space on an existing school site.

The Vallejo School District Superintendent came back to First 5 Solano and said they did not have a couple of available classrooms; instead, they had an entire shuttered school site, consisting of 18 classrooms available for use. While this was much more than was needed, it sparked a conversation about potential.

The First 5 Solano team came together after receiving this news, and questioned, what if this was possible? What if we could use all 18 classrooms, this whole school, for childcare and early learning? What would it do for the community? How many children could this create opportunities for? How could it support local childcare providers?

And importantly, what would it take?





The group established an exploratory team, which eventually evolved into a Leadership Team, consisting of First 5 Solano, the County Office of Education, and Child Start (the local Head Start provider). They dreamed up a model where they could bring together local licensed center and family childcare home providers in a centralized location, offering the potential for providers to expand their programs and have access to classroom space at operational cost, meaning each provider would only pay their share of utilities and ongoing maintenance, like water, landscaping, and PG&E, but the classroom space itself would be free. They could offer families in the neighborhood access to high quality childcare, wrap-around services, and safety for their children. Overall, they could create a supportive haven, adding up to 300 childcare slots annually for their community's youngest children.

The team approached the opportunity with an **open mind**, deciding to keep going until they got a hard no.

Together, they dreamed up **an innovative model**, where they could use the school facility as an early education and community resource center.

The team continued to move forward, hiring a project manager and engaging in activities like getting estimates, conferring with the state childcare licensing agency, and conducting a feasibility study to see if this project was viable. After they and the County Administrator affirmed the project was indeed viable, they pursued funding and acquired contributions from the City, County, State, and Federal governments, as well as several philanthropic organizations. Ultimately, the group was able to outright purchase the shuttered Beverly Hills Elementary School in Vallejo, California.

Five years later, in April of 2026, after countless hours of preparation, fundraising, planning, and renovation, Rise Vallejo opened its doors to the local community. This ambitious project overcame numerous and significant obstacles, from political resistance to complex construction/permitting processes and funding challenges. But by refusing to take "no" for an answer and choosing instead to lead with "what if," the initiative endured. This center opens the possibilities for more access to childcare and preschool, for parents to return to the workforce or attend school, for providers to increase their capacity and quality of service, for community providers to come together, and so much more. Through this guidebook, we share what we learned so that you too could explore if this model could be replicated in your community.



Case Study: Rise Vallejo

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When you think about the threads all... coming together to build this beautiful tapestry, it's not only about one thread or one string being woven in; we are addressing the various needs of the family. This is a tapestry that strengthens the whole family.

-Lisette Estrella Henderson,
Retired Solano County Superintendent of Schools

What is Rise Vallejo?

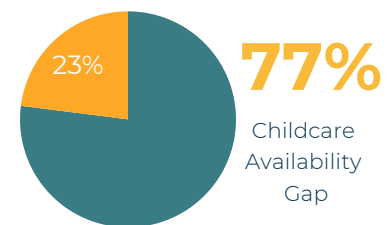
Rise Vallejo is an early education and community resource center created by First 5 Solano, Child Start, and the Solano County Office of Education. This center serves the Vallejo community primarily as an early learning center, but also by providing easy access to important social services, such as early developmental screening, parent education, health care, and other basic needs resources.



Why an Early Education and Community Resource Center?

Childcare is a cornerstone of a healthy economy and thriving communities, enabling parents to work, children to learn and grow, and providers to earn a sustainable living. However, across the nation, we are experiencing the reality where access to affordable, high-quality childcare is out of reach for many families. The childcare gap only continues to increase due to rising costs, a shortage of facilities, and poorly compensated providers.

In Solano County, in 2023, there were approximately 71,000 children (0-12). Of these children who had parents in the workforce, 77% did not have access to a childcare slot (which is 3% higher than the statewide average).

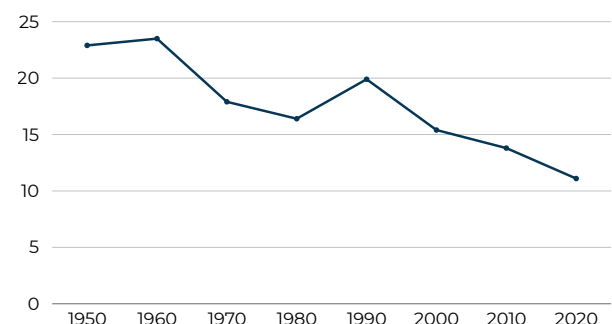


Meanwhile, across the state and nation, birth rates are at record lows, and they are only continuing to decline. This means there are fewer children entering into public schools, which equates to declining overall school enrollment. Declining TK-12 enrollment reduces per-pupil funding which means districts then face rising fixed costs with fewer students to help cover those costs. Eventually, these under-enrolled campuses become financially unstable resulting in school consolidations and closures.

In Solano County alone, as of early 2026, there were 66 public school sites listed on the California Department of Education School Directory Website as 'closed.' School closures tend to be concentrated in specific communities. They can disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color, often leaving behind vacant public assets in neighborhoods that already face service gaps.

California birth rates are at record lows

Births per 1,000 people

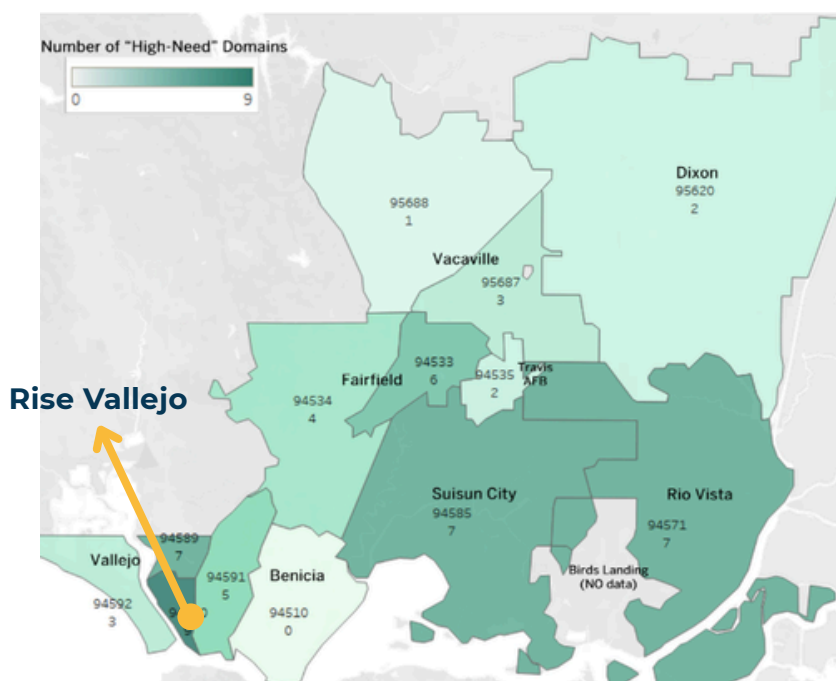


Source: California Department of Finance, E-7. California Population Estimates, with Components of Change and Crude Rates, July 1, 1900-2021

So, to think through repurposing those spaces and meeting community needs is not only timely, but a fiscally responsible and equity-driven response to the realities facing our communities today.

How First 5 Solano Learned About the Needs in Vallejo

With equity at the heart of its work, First 5 Solano uses data and evidence-based strategies to identify and close opportunity gaps that prevent young children from reaching their full potential. They invested in disparity mapping to identify locations that are most under-resourced in their county. They used the results to determine where to create neighborhood hubs of support. Here is an example of the disparity mapping by ZIP code.



This map depicts nine indicators of child well-being in comparison to the county average.

Indicators include:

- substantiated maltreatment allegation
- foster care entry
- child poverty
- unemployment
- educational attainment
- math and reading proficiency
- preschool enrollment
- child health insurance

If the score was worse than the county average, the zip code was considered at risk for that indicator. This map shows the density of flags. The darker the color, the more indicators of need.

Review Data and Indicators Here: [First 5 Solano's Procedure for Child Wellness Analysis](#)

Vallejo Community

Rise Vallejo is located in Vallejo, California. This community is a strong community, but its children also face big challenges like readiness for school, poverty, and safety issues, including:



Rise Vallejo's Early Education and Community Resource Center supports the diverse and vibrant Vallejo community, promoting collective work to address the root causes of Vallejo's unique challenges and build equitable access for all to sustain a healthy, thriving life.

The Vision of Rise Vallejo

Rise Vallejo was envisioned as an early education and community resource center. The team dreamed of the inclusion of a food pantry, medical and dental services on the campus, and much more, hoping to centralize services as a one-stop shop for individuals in the Vallejo community. However, at the time of publication, the team is still in the process of acquiring funding for the community resource center component to fully actualize this dream. You will see references to the community resource center component in marketing materials and presentations. To date, without the building for the community resource center, the services will focus on community access to special events and educational opportunities.



Impacts of Rise Vallejo

The impact of this project will shape outcomes not only now, but **well into the future**, influencing the life trajectory of the children and the health of the Vallejo community.



Early Education Center	Community Resource Center
Provides quality learning experiences for our youngest children	Serves the community with a full-service resource center, activities, and programs
Improves preschool and kindergarten readiness, both socially and academically	Provides referrals based on family need
Increases the number of childcare facilities with 15 new classrooms able to support Vallejo children	Offers access to basic needs, like food, healthcare, and housing support
Increases access to health services like wellness checks and important developmental screenings	Provides parenting classes and support groups
Offers parents support and time to continue a career or their own education	Creates a space for community members to come together, connect, learn, and grow
Provides childcare providers with access to shared resources for their children	
Supports childcare providers with continued education in child development	
Improves community safety by turning an unused property into a community safe haven	
Creates new employment opportunities with staffing of Rise Vallejo and the private service providers housed within	

This center expands access to childcare and preschool, enables parents to return to work or pursue education, allows providers to increase capacity and improve quality, and creates a hub where community-based organizations can come together in the service of families. This is economic development in action, removing barriers to work and education for families, supporting childcare providers, and laying the foundation for a stronger, more resilient local economy.

Most importantly, it helps ensure that children are prepared to enter kindergarten ready to learn and thrive. When children are kindergarten ready, they are positioned for stronger lifelong outcomes.



How it Was Presented to the Commission

When presenting the concept to the First 5 Solano Commission, First 5 Solano focused on how the project aligned with their strategic priorities, filled a need in their community, aligned with their systems work, and was financially feasible.

Key Questions to Determine Alignment Included:

- Would the project expand access to early learning opportunities for children ages 0–5?
- Would the investment improve school readiness and developmental outcomes?
- Would the project address disparities in early childhood access within the community?

Because the proposed site was located in a neighborhood experiencing significant economic hardship and limited childcare access, the project also aligned with the Commission's commitment to equity-driven investments.

This scale of project would require a substantial financial investment. The commission carefully evaluated the financial structure of the project. They required a feasibility study, early estimated projections, and avenues to acquire funding before agreeing to move forward.

Financial Questions to Determine Feasibility:

- What is the total cost of acquisition and renovation?
- How much funding would First 5 Solano need to contribute?
- What funding commitments could be secured from external partners?
- Could the facility operate long-term without requiring ongoing operational subsidies from First 5 Solano?



First 5 Solano Commission Approved:

- **\$1.72 million** in 2023 for the initial construction of the center
- **\$2.6 million** in 2024 to help close the funding gap to complete the renovation

Rise Vallejo Team

The project required the dedication of many key partnerships, including the leadership team, operational team, consultants, and champions.



Leadership Team

- ◆ **First 5 Solano**
- ◆ **Child Start**
- ◆ **Solano County Office of Education**



Operational Team

- ◆ **Child Start**
- ◆ **Solano County Office of Education**



Consultants

- ◆ **Applied Survey Research**, *Research and Evaluation Partner*
- ◆ **Terra Realty**, *Construction and Renovation Project Manager*
- ◆ **Landmark**, *General Contractor for Construction*



Champions

- ◆ **Elected County Official**, *Erin Hannigan*
- ◆ **Elected County Official**, *Lisette Estrella-Henderson*

“

Having outside connections and other perspectives was **critical**.

-Susan Smith, *Deputy Director Child Start, Inc.*

”

“

The players that were on the team were **instrumental** getting across the finish line...especially with the advocacy for children 0-5.

-Denise Winters, *Deputy Director First 5 Solano Children and Families Commission*

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Progress Snapshots: Rise Vallejo



Planning



Designing



Rebuilding

1



Viewing

2



Sharing

3

4

5



Demolishing

6

01 Community and Organizational Readiness

Preparation was essential to taking on an initiative of this magnitude and will be equally essential to replicate the Rise Vallejo model well. While this stage is foundational to the successful development of any project, it is important to note that roadblocks and unanticipated challenges are inevitable. Despite the most thorough preparation, initiating this project requires an attitude of flexibility and adaptability when issues arise and "no's" are encountered (and you will hear "no" often).

This section will provide insight on:

1. Community and Organizational Readiness
2. Landscape of Need

The information included below is meant to provide insight into the process followed by the leadership team of Rise Vallejo as well as lessons learned. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list and may look different depending on the project manager and/or county/city/state regulations.

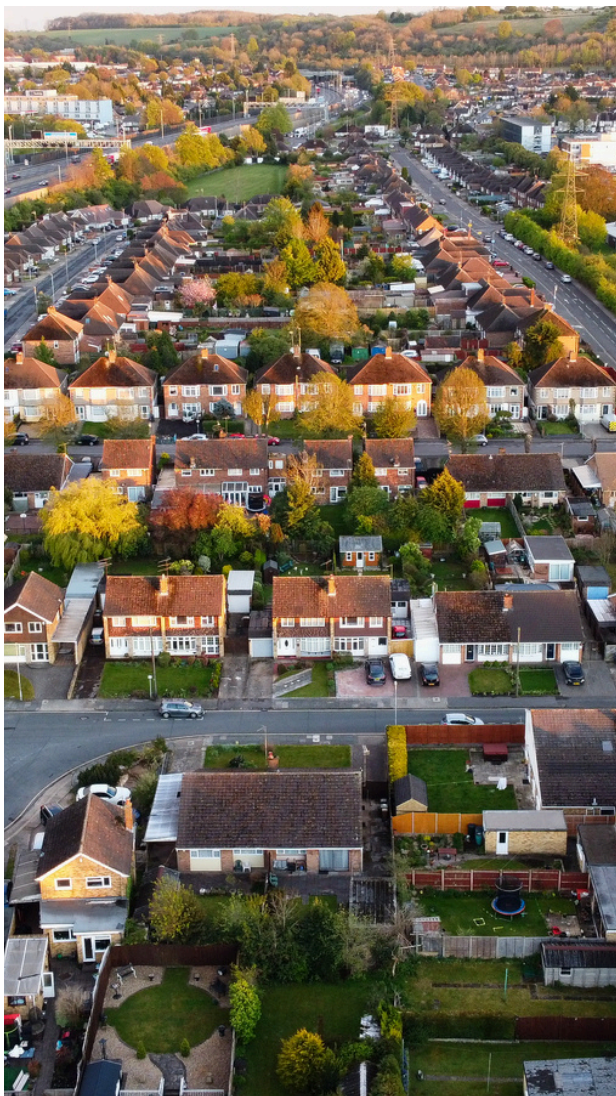


Community and Organizational Readiness

Repurposing a shuttered elementary school into an early education and community resource center requires substantial effort, time, and funding. Not only does it require a team of leaders who believe in the idea and are capable of embracing the calculated risk, but it also requires community readiness and the proper infrastructure of the organizations involved.

Community Readiness

To assess community readiness and need, here are some aspects to consider to determine if this project is a fit for your community.



Community Readiness Assessment:

- 1 There are shuttered or underutilized school buildings in the local community.
- 2 There is a gap in childcare access for children 0-5 in the local community.
- 3 There is a well-established organization that can act as the facility operator.
- 4 There is alignment with existing county policy agendas.

[Click here](#) to view the full list

Organizational Readiness

A strong, collaborative team of key partners is essential to generate trust, coordinate efforts, and successfully implement this project. For Rise Vallejo, it was important that this team consist of key representatives from well-established community organizations or agencies for the relationships, networks, and reputation they had in place. While the specific composition may vary across counties and initiatives, the following roles were used to guide the development of Rise Vallejo.

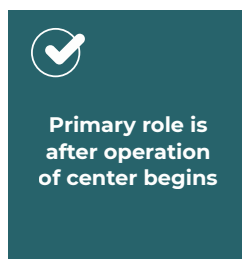


Roles and Responsibilities of Leadership Team

Catalyst: Responsibilities can include fundraising (cost of building, renovations, consultant contracts such as project manager and architect); hiring, managing, and collaborating with consultants; leveraging strategic and executive-level relationships; securing political approval; acquiring team and community input; developing newsletters and press releases as well as hosting informational sessions to keep community informed; developing agendas and convening team meetings; supporting the champions with documentation needed to convey the concept; articulating the need with data; managing any due diligence; and developing collateral.



Early Learning Center Operator: Responsibilities can include fundraising, overseeing construction; implementing facility renovations; designing and overseeing operations of the center; serving as subject matter expert; providing direct service; developing a sustainable funding model; utilizing existing infrastructure including HR Department; Fiscal Department, Insurance operator, and Facilities person; managing subcommittees; acquiring board approval; managing all childcare providers; and hiring staff and providers.



Tip! After identifying the leadership team, develop a contractual legal agreement. For Rise Vallejo, a legal consultant was brought in to co-create this agreement with the team. It could include aspects like who has primary decision-making authority, what the mechanisms for accountability and conflict resolution were, and how the responsibilities would be divided at the varying stages. For the Rise Vallejo team, a critical aspect of their work together was the shared responsibility and the dedication to compromise. A template for this agreement can be found below under tools and templates.

Organizational Readiness Assessment

In considering if an organization is properly equipped to execute the work required for this project, First 5 Solano put together an assessment of key aspects to consider. Organizational readiness refers not only to internal capacity, but also to alignment, leadership, and the ability to collaborate effectively across sectors. This assessment is divided into two parts:

1. **What All Organizations Will Need:** These are foundational capacities that all organizations should demonstrate.
2. **What Organizations Will Need by Role:** These are specific capacities that organizations should demonstrate to effectively fulfill their responsibilities.

Review Readiness Assessment Here: [Sample Organizational Readiness Assessment](#)

Understanding Community Need

To position this model to school districts, local politicians, and funders, data can open the conversation. First 5 Solano had a long history of prioritizing data to identify the needs in their community. They worked with Applied Survey Research (ASR), a research and evaluation consultant, to apprise themselves of the landscape of need for childcare and child well-being. This included aspects such as:

- Local child care deserts
- Provider shortages
- Childcare center/home shortages
- Equity and access Issues
- School readiness scores
- Maltreatment rates
- Foster care entry
- Child poverty rates



Data can be used to connect to broader public or policy goals as well as to equitably identifying a location for your center (see more on page 9). After you know your community and know who your key partners are, you can consider how to contact your local school districts.

Shuttered Schools

Lastly, to review a school directory of closed schools across districts in California, see the **California Department of Education Directory**. This should help you to determine which schools have been shuttered in your community and the opportunities you may consider as you pursue your project.



Tip! When looking at a shuttered school, don't hold out for the "perfect" option. Ask: Is it available? Can we make it work? You may need to compromise, but a good-enough space that meets your core needs is often the right move.



02

Contacting the School District

“ This is economic development in action by removing barriers to work and education for families, supporting childcare providers, and laying the foundation for a stronger, more resilient local economy. When we invest in our youngest children, we strengthen our entire community.

-Erin Hannigan,
*Former Solano County Board of Supervisors, District 1 Representative
and Former First 5 Solano Commissioner*



In many communities, shifting demographics are leading to the closure of public and private elementary schools. Declining birth rates and enrollment numbers, along with increased child to teacher ratios, leave classrooms unused, and at times, entire schools empty. These closed school sites offer an opportunity to breathe life into an existing infrastructure while addressing one of the most urgent challenges facing families today: the growing gap in quality childcare access.

Once a school is closed permanently, in almost all cases, the district retains ownership and responsibility for the facility until it is sold, leased, repurposed, or demolished. This means they must consider aspects like facility preservation and maintenance. School districts may be open to leasing or selling the property, but there is work that needs to be done before initial contact is made to have the chance for the best outcome.

This section will provide insight on:

1. Preparatory Work to Contact School Districts
2. Initiating Conversation with School Districts
3. Leasing vs. Buying Considerations
4. School Relationships

The information included below is meant to provide insight into the process followed by the leadership team of Rise Vallejo as well as lessons learned. This work may look different depending on county/city/state of implementation or relationships already in place.

Preparing to Contact the School District

Research District for Context

Before contacting a school district, conduct background research to understand the current landscape. This preparation will help you engage in the conversation with a clear understanding of how your proposal may align with the district's needs.

Focus on researching three key areas:

1. Enrollment Trends
2. Facility Utilization
3. Budget Deficits



Document the findings in a short briefing sheet. Try to find how your vision supports their current priority areas.



Research Considerations:



Enrollment Trends:

Search through items such as the district's annual reports, School Accountability Report Cards, and demographics studies for phrases like "declining enrollment," "student population trends," or "projected enrollment." You can also use state education data portals (e.g., California Department of Education DataQuest) to cross-reference enrollment figures by school and grade level.



Facility Utilization:

Search the district's Facilities Master Plan or Capital Improvement Plan to find signs of underutilization, including indications of declining use, closure notices, or operation below enrollment capacity.



Budget Deficits:

Search the district's Budget Reports or Board of Education Meeting Minutes to understand their financial position. Look for indicators like deficit projections, staffing reductions, or infrastructure funding gaps.

Leveraging District Connections

When exploring a partnership with a school district, relationships are often the entry point. In many cases, the cold call approach does not work. The door to possibility tends to open when someone on the inside is willing to listen, connect, and champion the idea.

Consider who you, or your network, has connections with to act as a starting point. This could be:

- School Board Members
- County or District Superintendent
- Facilities Director
- County Supervisors

For Rise Vallejo, the First 5 Solano Team (Catalyst) had a member of their commission who was the County Superintendent of Schools. Through her relationship, First 5 Solano connected with the Vallejo City Unified School District (VCUSD) Superintendent and shared Rise Vallejo's vision and purpose.

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Relationships have to come first. Relationship is **paramount**. None of this could have happened without relationships first.

Lisette Estrella-Henderson,
Former First 5 Solano County Superintendent

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Whether it is through a member of a commission or through a connection via another route, consider the strategy that will work best for you to communicate your project's vision. This could be in taking time to develop the relationship yourself first, or by jumping in to share through a more formal pitch.

Also, consider that landscapes change over time, and while you may receive a “no” at one time, things change. It doesn't hurt to ask the question again when the landscape feels right or leadership and priorities change.

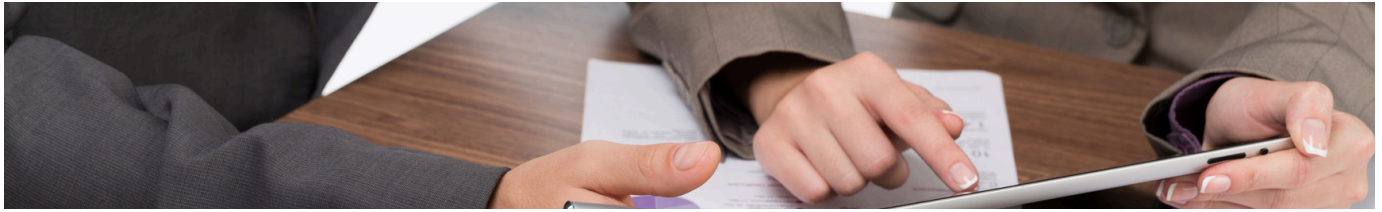


Strategies for Preparation of Your Conversation

- ✓ **Lead with** shared-values, child well-being, community good, and the desire to support kids to enter into the district ready to learn
- ✓ Frame the ask as **exploratory**, not fixed
- ✓ Come **prepared** with early data, alignment with the district's goals, and how it can support the key areas that your prior research showed you about their situation
- ✓ Consider that additional childcare programs may be seen as competitive with programs such as State Preschool. Consider framing the additions as a part of an **unmet demand landscape**. Co-location then becomes a leadership decision informed by whether community need (e.g., only 22% of children served) can support multiple programs.

Tip! Show the [Rise Vallejo website](#) as a sample of this idea working in your pitch!

Meeting the City School District Superintendent



Once you've identified a champion, ask them to help coordinate an introductory meeting with the City School District Superintendent. Ideally, your champion should broker and attend the meeting with you. Their presence can serve as a trusted bridge, easing the introduction and establishing credibility. Having your original connection in the room signals shared interest, which can help foster a sense of trust and alignment from the outset. This is particularly important in early conversations, where district leadership may be weighing both political and operational implications.

Additionally, try to understand the makeup of the school district leadership and who is a trusted ally of the superintendent on their staff. Who do they take advice from? The chief program officer, the early childhood director, the facility person? Know who will influence the decision-making so that you can know what will appeal to them and how to build a bridge to get them on board and keep them engaged.

Strategic Pitch Considerations

- ◆ **Problem:** Identify the problem (lack of quality childcare, inequity, need to relocate classrooms).
- ◆ **Opportunity/Alignment in Purpose:** Connect with district's goals or identified funding deficits or declining enrollment trends.
- ◆ **Impact:** Clarify number of children/families this could serve, jobs it could create, and benefit to the community it could have, etc.
- ◆ **Call to Action:** State what you need from them (e.g., inventory of vacant/underutilized sites).

[Click here](#) for a sample pitch from First 5 Solano's ED and the Former Solano County Superintendent of Schools!

In this meeting, build on the strategies outlined prior, framing your proposal through a lens of mutual benefit and alignment with district priorities. Come prepared with a more formal pitch, ideally accompanied by a concise briefing document or one-pager that summarizes the vision, opportunity, and next steps. Lead with what could spark their interest.

“ Know who you're talking to. Know what's going to **spark** them. ”
-Michele Harris

What could create a spark?

- ◆ Money savings?
- ◆ Union issues?
- ◆ Impacted kids?
- ◆ Low success rates?
- ◆ Loosing staff as schools shut down?

Leasing vs. Buying Considerations

A school district may have a preference for leasing the facility or allowing you to purchase the school. For Rise Vallejo, they started out offering a lease agreement but ended up selling the school outright. If you do have a choice between the two, consider:

Leasing	Buying
<i>Pros</i> ◆ Less substantial funding upfront (pay for utilities, property tax, etc.) ◆ District remains the owner and responsible for all maintenance and upkeep <i>Cons</i> ◆ One classroom would need to be a T-K room run by the district ◆ Required to abide by union standards (hiring, benefits, etc.) which could make it more costly ◆ District approval required for all construction upgrades ◆ District process takes time, which means you move slower	<i>Pros</i> ◆ Can hire staff as a non-profit, which makes it significantly less costly ◆ Decision-making power is solely yours (district has to follow state requirements provided by the Division of the State Architect (DSA)) ◆ Can set vibe of facility, including the philosophy and guiding principles or the child and family approach ◆ Cost to renovate is lower than it would be with district requirements <i>Cons</i> ◆ Financially and legally responsible for all maintenance and upkeep

“Purchasing the school...really moved us into yes, this is feasible. The bureaucracy became a really challenging thing to navigate. So, if I had to give anyone advice, I would say get the property free and clear as soon as you can so your team can become the decision makers to effectively implement your vision.

-Michele Harris, *Executive Director*
First 5 Solano Children and Families Commission



School Partner Relationships

Strong relationships with individuals at the school district can help you get critical information that will shape your project. First 5 Solano formed a relationship with the superintendent as well as the facility person which allowed them to keep the project on track and learn more about the history of the school's development.

District Superintendent Relationship

The relationship with the superintendent is **crucial**. Their buy-in will be essential when this process becomes time-consuming or challenging for school staff that may already be overloaded. Their belief in the project will help it move forward. For Rise Vallejo, the Superintendent needed to **reaffirm** this decision multiple times.

Relationships Matter.



“

It's really easy for people to say this is a stumbling block we can't get past. It was due to the **District Superintendent's understanding** of the importance of early childhood and the ultimate impact this would have that kept the high level goal in mind.

-Michele Harris, *Executive Director*
First 5 Solano Children and Families Commission

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Facility Manager Relationship

The facility person was able to **provide information** on:

- The school
- It's history
- Renovations already completed
- Previous blueprints
- Changes to utilization rates

03

Site Identification, Purchase, and Transfer



Shuttered school sites are a great option for repurposing for early education and community resource centers. These sites are already designed for children. They were developed with safety standards and ADA-compliance in mind, have some age-appropriate facilities, and previously installed systems scaled for daily occupancy (e.g., HVAC, plumbing, and electrical). In the face of the widening childcare gap, repurposing a shuttered school can be both a practical and visionary solution.

This section will provide insight on:

1. Site Identification
2. Project Planning
3. Purchasing the School

The information included below is meant to provide insight into the process followed by the leadership team of Rise Vallejo as well as lessons learned. This work may look different depending on county/city/state of implementation or relationships already in place.

Site Identification

Benefits of a Shuttered School

Identifying a shuttered school that is already established has various benefits, including:



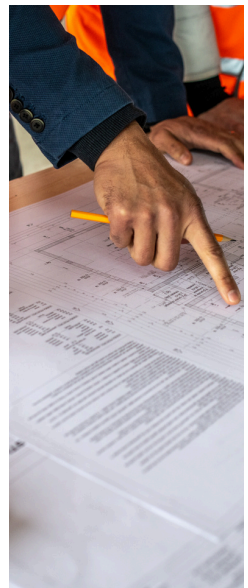
The site likely is:

- ◆ Built within a neighborhood, and many times, that means, the school is the heart of that community
- ◆ On a bus line
- ◆ Already zoned for childcare
- ◆ ADA compliant (can depend on age of building)
- ◆ Has history....neighbors will likely be interested in the project and care about what it is repurposed into (for Rise, the site manager actually attended elementary school at the site!)

Initial Site Visit

It is possible that in your county, you may have multiple schools that are available, especially as child birth rates continue to decline. When initially visiting the site or sites, consider looking at the property both through the eyes of leasing and purchasing. Consider:

- **Neighborhood**
 - Transportation, walkability, and safety
- **Structure of the Rooms**
 - Structure in consideration of childcare licensing requirements. (In CA, facilities require a minimum of 35 sq. ft. of usable indoor space and 75 sq. ft. of usable outdoor space per child).
- **Bones of the School**
 - Feasibility of having a laundry room, food prep area, front office, appropriate playgrounds for all ages, wiring that has the capacity for all appliances, etc.
- **Plumbing**
 - Needs, like two child appropriate toilets per classroom...will the plumbing support that? When was the sewer line built?
- **ADA Requirements**
 - Current ADA requirements and how the building would need to be remodeled to accommodate those with disabilities.



Tip! Work with your state licensing department to understand what the requirements to achieve building compliance. Your project manager and architect should also be able to support you in understanding the specifications.

Project Planning

Viability of Site and Project

After the initial viewing of the school site by the leadership team, the next step was to send out the county General Services Department to do a walk through assessment of the building and generate a viability report. This was sent to the CAO to evidence the feasibility of moving forward.

Review Viability Report Here: [Rise Vallejo Due Diligence Review](#)

Cost Determination

The leadership team also worked with the school's architect to create an initial blueprint of the renovations that would be needed for the transition into an early learning center (see **Chapter 5** for copies of the designs and descriptions of the changes). The initial blueprint was used to determine a general cost for renovations, which was a piece of determining how feasible this project would be for the team.

This cost estimate was used to present to First 5 Solano's commission for approval of the fiscal responsibility the organization was taking on. It was also used to begin funding for the project.



Original Property



Original Design





Purchasing the School

School districts have to go through a process to be able to put a school up for sale. They have to identify the facility as a surplus facility, which then makes it available for any public agency. First 5 Solano is a county, government agency, which is why they were the entity that purchased the school site and then transferred ownership to Child Start, a nonprofit.

First 5 Solano prepared and submitted a bid. Negotiations ensued, letters were submitted, and eventually, the bid was accepted. This process was intensive and required the involvement of: lawyers, General Services Department, school district, county real estate agents, and the County Administrator.

Why First 5 Solano Purchased and Then Transferred

◆ Government Agency Designation

When the school was first up for bid, it was restricted to government agencies in the first round. To acquire the property, First 5 Solano, being a county, government agency, made the bid. Within months after purchase, they transferred ownership to Child Start, a nonprofit.

◆ Reducing Administrative Steps and Costs

With Child Start being a nonprofit agency, they did not need to abide by county restrictions or oversight. If First 5 Solano kept the facility in their name, it would have been a county construction project. This would have been more expensive due to bureaucratic oversight.

Options to Purchase

Not all individuals who embark on this journey will be a government agency. If you do not have that status, some options are available:

1. Find a public agency to partner with that can submit on your behalf and transfer ownership post purchase.
2. Wait to see if the building is bid on or not in the first round. If it wasn't bid on, try to bid when it opens for public bidding.



Consideration:

- ✦ Partnering with a government agency does come with associated administrative and bureaucratic requirements. They do need to abide by county regulations, processes, and hiring specifications.

Details for the Purchase

Facts

- ✦ **Who was Involved:** The district's bank, title company, and real estate agent
- ✦ **How was the Payment Handled:** First 5 Solano did a wire transfer of funds
- ✦ **How did They Choose a Title Company:** The school district already had a title company they partnered with, and so, that is the company that was selected
- ✦ **Was it Financed or Paid Outright:** First 5 Solano had acquired the funds to pay for the facility outright, negating the need for financing



How did First 5 acquire the funds?
See Chapter 4!

The process of purchasing the school was similar to that of purchasing a home. It went through the appraisal stage, required a down payment, and went through a title company to transfer ownership. As this was a state process, much of this was handled through the district's established personnel.

Negotiation Process

In the process of negotiation, First 5 Solano used an approach where they presented the purchase as a way to accomplish a common goal. They explained:



We are on the same side. With this purchase, Rise Vallejo will focus on preparing the kids to be ready for school, so that when they come to the school district, they will be ready to succeed.

The **actual cost of the building was not negotiable**. First 5 Solano paid the appraised amount for the building, which came back at **\$2.8 million**.

Establishing a Contract

In transferring ownership of the school to Child Start, First 5 Solano and their board had to establish a contract indicating terms such as the length of operation and thresholds. Considerations for this contract included:



- ◆ How long does the childcare center have to operate?

The Rise Vallejo team agreed upon 25 years. If the center operated for less than the 25 years, the facility would be transferred back to First 5 Solano. This was managed through a restricted deed, which becomes unrestricted at the 25 year mark.

- ◆ What is the threshold for operation?

The Rise Vallejo team decided the center had to operate at least (6 or 8) classrooms to be considered fully operational. If a provider has to leave, Child Start is responsible for filling that space.

The creation of this contract was made in collaboration with First 5 Solano, Child Start, and their associated legal consultants. The team was very collaborative in its creation and in determining terms that all parties were in agreement with.

04 Funding and Advocacy

The project in general required a substantial amount of collaboration from key partners. Advocating for the funding required to successfully complete a project of this magnitude required approaching a variety of funders and tapping into pre-established relationships and networks across the county and state.

This section will provide insight on:

1. Determining Project Costs
2. Funding Strategy
3. Asking for Funding

The information included below is meant to provide insight into the process followed by the leadership team of Rise Vallejo as well as lessons learned.. This will look differently based on location, agencies involved, timing, and ways of framing the asks.





Determining Projected Costs

To determine a baseline cost for the project, the leadership team met with the school district's architect. The architect had the school's original blueprints for the infrastructure and design of the facility. Based on the blueprints, the architect was able to project the cost for the renovations desired by the team at that time (see Chapter 5 for original blueprint of the school and initial design).

What Was Projected

The district's architect projected that the improvements would cost

\$16 million

The team took this back to the project manager and worked together to get the cost down. They were able to land on

\$13 million

Initial desired changes to the facility included aspects such as:

- Playground additions
- Extra parking for providers and parents
- Updated multi-purpose room
- Classrooms flexible enough to offer services for full scale of ages (infants to preschoolers)

*As time went on, this list evolved and can be reviewed in future pages.

The initial blueprint allowed for a preliminary project cost estimate. After the school was purchased, another architect was hired who worked with the team to update designs as decisions were made and a better understanding of the condition of the school premises were uncovered.

Funding Strategy

First 5 Solano is a county agency that has over 25 years of experience in fundraising and advocacy efforts for the children and families in their community. They have spent years developing relationships with philanthropic organizations as well as legislative allies. These relationships were essential to acquiring funding for this project.

First 5 Solano had focused on developing relationships across varied funding streams for years. They considered:

1. Philanthropy
2. County
3. State
4. Federal

Tips to begin developing relationships to set the stage to ask for funding can be found here.



Developing Relationships with Potential Funders:



Identify Champions:

Consider how you and your organization are the architect of your own resource map. Determine how you, your staff, commissioners, and partners are connected in the community. Select individuals who can be your champions, or those who are in positions where they can connect with legislators and/or agencies. These individuals will be advocates who believe in your organization and can 'plant the seed' for those who need to hear it.



Common Priorities:

Know of local, state, and federal legislators and changemakers that align with your priority areas. Keep up with their newsfeeds and learn about what they care about. Identify who has a connection with these individuals.



Initiating Relationships:

Do not ask for funding in the initial meeting. Present yourself as a partner doing the work in the community. Have something to leave behind (one pager or brief)



Build the Relationship:

Be reliable if they do reach out for help or to inquire about something in your area of expertise. Send happy birthday messages, ask about their children, attend their events...be in their world.

Asking for Funding

Knowing the right time to ask for funding can vary, depending on the situation and the funder you are approaching. For some funding, you will follow the typical RFP process, but for others, like approaching legislators, consider aspects such as the following:



Tip from First 5 Solano's Champion:

"Don't be tentative about your ask. Be unapologetic. Ask with **confidence**, your community deserves this."

- ◆ Identify where you are in the calendar cycle and if it is close to the start or end of the legislator's term. They will want to fund something early in their term to see results.
- ◆ Assess the landscape and use political discernment to understand the feasibility of your request being considered. Timing matters.
- ◆ Do not ask repetitively, hoping to get a yes. You want to be well-prepared to make the ask and get a yes the first time. This might mean waiting, and keeping them updated as you are doing the work.

Funding Request Proposals

Every funder that First 5 Solano and Child Start approached received a funding proposal. The approach First 5 Solano used was to ask for more and assume they would get less. However, others use a different approach, such as asking for less initially. To gauge the request amount, it is a best practice to do research on the funder. Review items such as what they've funded in the past and how much they gave. This helps you to gauge what to ask for. For example, if you wanted to ask an organization for \$1 million, and yet, they have only ever given \$200,000 max, this is probably not going to be a successful pursuit.

For examples of funding proposals sent to different partners, see below.

Funder	Original Request	Approved Amount	Link to Proposal
Senator Dodd	\$1 million	\$1 million	Funding Proposal
Senator Dodd	\$4 million	\$4 million	Funding Proposal
City of Vallejo	\$610,000	\$610,000	Grant Proposal

Funding Acquisition

Acquiring funding is not a prescriptive process. It is fluid. You have to be ready to respond or initiate. Here are some examples of the funding First 5 Solano was able to acquire. You can see they were able to secure funding from philanthropy, county, state, and federal sources.

Funding Levels	Amount	Funder	Purpose	Avenue
 PHILANTHROPY	\$610,000	City Council	Early Learning Center (ELC)	Champion
 COUNTY	\$1,870,000	Board of Supervisors	ARPA ELC	First 5 Solano
	\$2,000,000	County Administrator	School Purchase	First 5 Solano
 STATE	\$5,000,000	Senator Dodd	ELC Roof	Champion
 FEDERAL	\$500,000	Congressman Garamendi	Early Learning Center (ELC)	County Platform

Review Financial Development Example: Rise Vallejo Funding Development

“ There were quite a few things that funders latched onto. For example, the inclusiveness and getting parents to work...and because it's community-based, it has the potential to help so many individuals.

-Denise Winters, Deputy Director
First 5 Solano Children and Families Commission

Fundraising Capacity and Commitment

Successful fundraising requires a meaningful investment of time and resources in identifying opportunities, building relationships, researching funders, writing proposals, and managing grants. First 5 Solano and Child Start, Inc. not only invested time in pursuing funding but also contributed financially as project partners. Their investments demonstrated both their confidence in the project and their commitment to ensuring its success.

Partner Commitment

First 5 Solano County Commission

Invested: \$4.8M

Child Start, Inc.

Invested: \$4.2M



05

Renovation and Design

“ You have to have a leadership team with the vision and capacity to see such a project all the way through . Converting a shuttered elementary school into a state-of-the-art early learning center involves major components. Without a dedicated team of visionary leaders willing to do the work, projects such as Rise Vallejo would be very difficult to realize.

-Juan Cisneros, Executive Director
Child Start, Inc.

Our Renovation and Design Team

To assist with the renovation and design of the building, a team of experts came together. This was especially important because the leadership team lacked a background in construction and needed support to navigate the process. The primary individuals involved with renovation and design in addition to the Operations Team were:

- **Project Manager:** Initially contracted by First 5 Solano for the exploratory phase of the project. Child Start entered into a subsequent contract with this manager for the pre-construction and construction phases.
- **Two Architects:** One from the school district that was used to draw plans for the initial budget, and a second who was used to update designs throughout the process; this architect was hired with help from the Project Manager.
- **General Contractor:** Procured by Child Start with support from the project manager. The general contractor's experience working on school properties was an advantage in the process of demolishing and renovating the property.

The Project Manager had a background in construction and was able to provide the insight needed to act as a liaison between the leadership and operations team throughout the process. See more about this role below:

Project Manager: Role "If you're not a construction expert, it's critical to have a project manager who can talk and interpret construction speak, read the updated plans, track invoices, and manage the costs." -Juan Cisneros	◆ Drew up initial designs with school architect ◆ Acquired permits as needed ◆ Facilitated property clean-up ◆ Hired the architect and landscaper ◆ Monitored cost, project completion, and ongoing requests ◆ Supported Child Start with procuring and hiring the general contractor, civil engineer, and geologist ◆ Supported ongoing communication and advocacy to resolve permitting and code compliance issues
--	--

View Rise Vallejo Progress and Design

Design	Description	Link
Property Picture	Photo of the property when initially purchased	Photo 1
Design 1	Initial design for cost projections	Photo 2
Design 2	Final design for build out	Photo 3

Major Renovations

The Rise Vallejo team completed many renovation projects at the shuttered school site. Some were to meet ADA and childcare licensing requirements, some to provide flexible classrooms and play areas to offer a full range of services for children 0-5, and some simply to make the space a more welcoming environment for children.

This list provides some examples of what renovations were done and the reasons behind the purpose for the renovation

Renovation	Main Reason
Roof Replacement	Structural Integrity
Window Replacement	
Flood Mitigation on Wing E	
Classrooms: Child-Sized Toilets	Child Licensing Requirements  See classroom design with two toilets to promote enrollment and licensing flexibility
Classrooms: Secondary Exit	
Classrooms: Kitchen Area for Food Prep/Storage	
Classrooms: General Storage	
Laundry Room	
Updated Adult Bathrooms	ADA Compliance
Braille Signage	
Resurfaced Concrete	Site Improvements
Replaced Blacktop and Playgrounds	
Added Additional Parking Lot*	

*Additional parking was needed due to a higher staff to child ratio than when the school operated as an elementary school (numbers went from 30 staff to close to 70).

Renovation	Main Reason
Paved Back Field	 Site Improvements See playground design and external landscaping plans
Multipurpose Room (new electronics, walls, floors, etc.)	
Kitchen	
Removed Portables (4)	
Updated Sewer Pipe	
Updated Water Pipe*	
Updated 5 and Constructed 4 New Age-Specific Playgrounds (9 total)	
Preparation for Solar	
Drought Tolerant Landscaping	

*The water pipe was updated to accommodate the need for toilets in every classroom

“Ownership brings **risk**, which is why it was so important to develop a construction plan that addressed **longevity**. That dealt a long-term warranty for the roof, windows that would last for a long time, solar accessibility, the right waterway, the right piping...all those things you need to **make the facility as sustainable as possible**.
*-Juan Cisneros, Executive Director
 Child Start, Inc.*”



06

Building Your Team: Childcare Providers



Finding and selecting the right providers is a critical step in actualizing the vision and values of your early learning center. The team put a lot of effort and time into preparing for outreach, guidance on becoming a licensed center, and determining how to select the right providers for the Rise Vallejo team.

This section will provide insight into:

1. Outreach to Local Providers
2. Growing Your Community of Providers
3. Developing Contracts and Agreements

The information included below is meant to provide insight into the process followed by the leadership team of Rise Vallejo as well as lessons learned. This process will look different dependent upon priorities, values, and relationships with local providers already established.



Benefits for Childcare Providers

Childcare providers are small business owners operating under uniquely tight constraints. Their revenue is largely fixed, set by what families can afford or what subsidies cover, while costs like staffing, licensing, and supplies continue to rise.

With low pay and high turnover across the workforce, providers have little financial flexibility and often absorb personal and operational strain just to keep their doors open. Most are not driven by profit, but by a deep commitment to children and families, making their work both mission-driven and economically fragile.

The Rise Vallejo model helps ease these pressures by removing one of the biggest barriers to sustainability: facility costs. By offering space in a repurposed school site requiring only contributions toward shared operational expenses, providers can stabilize and possibly expand their businesses and reinvest in quality care and staff.

This approach not only strengthens providers as small businesses, but also allows them to focus on what matters most: creating safe, nurturing environments for children and supporting the families who depend on them.

“

Childcare providers are doing **essential, deeply personal** work. But they're often doing it while carrying the full weight of a fragile business model that operates on razor thin margins. What we've tried to do with Rise Vallejo is remove some of the biggest barriers providers face. When providers aren't worried about making rent, they can **invest** in their staff, focus on quality, and sustain the work that brought them into this field in the first place.

*-Michele Harris, Executive Director
First 5 Solano Children and Families Commission*

”



Outreach to Local Providers

The operations team lead, Child Start, had quite a few connections already with childcare providers in their community. To begin, they contacted those they already had relationships with (close to 19 providers). Many of these providers had an initial interest in becoming a part of the Rise Vallejo team.

The team also hosted quarterly information sessions to offer insight into: (1) Rise Vallejo concept, (2) Facility assets, (3) Rise Vallejo plans and dreams, (4) Why providers should consider locating at Rise Vallejo, and (5) Timeline.

Example of Provider Information Session PPT: [PowerPoint](#) (more in Appendix D)

Common Questions from Providers



Tip from Operational Lead:

Keep in mind...providers are business owners. Tailor the sessions to that audience.

◆ How much will Child Start charge per classroom?

Questions arose regarding rates. With Rise Vallejo, providers are responsible for operational costs, and so, providers wanted clarity on what that would entail.

◆ What are the operational hours? Can we use the multipurpose room?

Logistical questions arose, including what their operational hours would need to be, if they could use the multipurpose room, and if there were limitations on what they could use it for.

◆ What PD is available? Would you be helping to train our staff?

Questions on professional development were asked, especially about what training would be offered to staff in addition to the owners.

◆ What does it take to become a licensed childcare center?

Many inquired about what it would take to become a licensed childcare center. The team provided resources and shared tips and learned experiences to guide that conversation.

Tip from Operational Lead: Know what is important to you at the beginning. If it is a variety of providers using different curricula, consider how you market that and incentivize. Does that reflect in the rubric scale and outreach approach?

Growing Your Team of Providers

To determine which providers would join the Rise Vallejo team, a process was put into place. The team developed an initial interest form, a matrix to score responses, and scheduled follow-up interviews.

The interest form acquired information regarding their reason for wanting to be a part of Rise Vallejo, their current set up and experience, and readiness to implement required services. The matrix allowed the team to rank providers using a scale. It consists of 4 indicators. The team considered aspects, such as their current experience in operating a licensed facility, level of education or training, willingness to implement tools and submit data required by Rise Vallejo, and experience with or willingness to implement assessments and screenings, including DRDP and ASQ 3. While the matrix provided an initial method to screen and select providers, the top providers selected would then engage in an interview with the team.

The interview helped the team to get a better sense of the provider, their values, their business, as well as their readiness to commit to operating a licensed childcare center.

Rubric Indicators

- ✦ **Operating vs. owning a licensed childcare facility**
- ✦ **Ranges of ages**
- ✦ **Number of classrooms they are willing to operate**
- ✦ **Readiness scale components (out of 7)**

[Click here](#) to view the Rubric used at Rise Vallejo!

“A lot of it is **readiness**. Are they ready to really take that step and commit to opening at the ELC....there's all kinds of ranges of readiness, even with some of the most experienced providers. So, we needed to be able to **differentiate** between those with a high matrix score but weren't ready.”
-Juan Cisneros, Executive Director
Child Start, Inc.

Who participated in interviews?

Based on the contract developed, the operations team was responsible for hiring and selecting providers. However, they did invite members from the leadership team should they wish to participate.



Developing Contracts (MOU)

Child Start developed two partnership contracts, one for childcare providers and one for community partners. The development of the childcare provider contract was made in collaboration with the first provider successfully recruited as a partner at Rise Vallejo. Flexibility in the initial design was reinforced, as questions the provider asked helped to shape what was placed into the contract template, including which elements would remain flexible based on age range and the business plans of the providers coming on.

Examples of Sections Included

- ◆ Occupancy and Operations
- ◆ Term and Termination
- ◆ Limitations on Use
- ◆ Licensure and Permitting
- ◆ Protecting Confidentiality
- ◆ Right of Entry
- ◆ Alterations and Improvements
- ◆ Insurance

Example of Provider Contract: Please see an example of the [provider contract](#) here and additional appendices are included in Appendix D.



Example of a Consideration that Arose

The Rise Team explained how they received a grant to purchase furniture for all the classrooms. This led to questions that resulted in adaptations to the contract, including: after the furniture wears out in the future, would the providers or Rise Vallejo replace it? If the providers replaced it, would they then own it or would it be the property of Rise?

Advice From Our Team

Juan Cisneros, Leadership Team

If you're going to open an early learning center such as Rise Vallejo, you have to **accept change and confront challenges** while maintaining a strong face of leadership and positive attitude throughout the process. Further, it's important to have partners with the experience and skillset to support the effort. Although Child Start, through its Head Start program, was a significant funder of the project, we needed a partner that was creative and ambitious with looking for major funding and we had that with First 5 Solano. Similarly, Child Start has been successfully operating early care and education centers and childcare partnerships for decades throughout Napa and Solano counties, and more recently in Contra Costa and Marin. However, we did not have the experience of managing an entire school, consisting of 18 classrooms. **Bringing in expert consultants**, including partners from the Solano County Office of Education, was critical in understanding and addressing the operational needs of a school, which helped out tremendously once the center was opened. Ultimately, it comes down to leadership and the **ability to build strong, trusting relationships with the community**, including funders, public organizations, childcare providers, neighbors and families who trust us to care for their loved ones. Without all of these partners, we would not have been successful at opening the center, but most importantly, sustaining Rise Vallejo for years to come.



Susan Smith, Leadership Team

Create a **multifaceted team**, with experts and influencers covering each area of development needed including fund development, design, operations, branding, and marketing. Allow for those experts to lead the process when designing the foundation for each of these systems and knowing that things will always need adaptations and will change.

When it comes to creating and designing a facility, keep the children, families, and future staff in mind. Sometimes it is the little things that are put in place that can make a **huge difference** when operating. Work closely with architects and playground designers to create a space that is both practical and magical for those who will be spending a majority of their waking hours at school.

Realize that as trailblazers, obstacles will arise and policies will need to be stretched and that may take time. It won't happen overnight. It will be important for the leadership team to be **clear** in the intended plan for the facility and how to express that to any regulatory entities to facilitate change needed and any adaptations to support the goals for the project.



Advice From Our Team

Lisette Estrella-Henderson, Leadership Team

Whatever comes your way, **be relentless in the pursuit of that vision**. Stay open to anything, because everything is possible if you are open to anything. Don't immediately say, "Well, that won't work," because of course it won't if you're not willing to explore it; who would have thought we were going to buy a building? If we had closed ourselves off to even thinking about it because it was daunting or because it cost a lot of money, that could have been the end of it.

Relationships matter, so continue to stay connected to them; those are key ingredients. Like a good recipe, if you have a strong foundation, you can switch it up down the road, but you must be open to being creative, open to the potential of what partners can bring, even if it looks different from the original vision. And be politically strategic, politically intelligent. Key into the right people and believe in this project's capacity to change lives. Believe in your vision.



Erin Hannigan Andrews, Champion

It's important to **think outside the norms** of how you currently address needs in your community to continue to have an impact. Systemic change happens best when its data driven, involves partnerships and embodies courage to do things differently. **Timing** is also important. When you are embarking on a big project, identify your key partners and local leaders, like-minded community members and grant funders. Does the project align with their interests, goals and objectives?

Identify your Champions, the people who can lean into their relationships to move curiosity about the project to commitment to the project. For the funders on your list, you want to know their funding cycles, shared interests, political capital and aligned partners that can bolster your ask. Share plans and progress, tell the story of your project and how they fit in it. Involve your partners in decisions, big and small, don't be afraid to compromise. Be patient but relentless and **most of all celebrate progress!**



If you're going to commit to something like this, you really need to be willing to engage fully.

-Juan Cisneros,
Executive Director, Child Start, Inc.

Advice From Our Team

Michele Harris, Leadership Team

For those of you who are control freaks (like me), it can be helpful to approach large, collaborative projects with patience and flexibility. When power and decision-making are genuinely shared, progress may take more time, but it often leads to stronger and **more sustainable outcomes**. Establishing a regular cadence for communication and check-ins can help keep everyone aligned and reduce unnecessary stress.

Projects of this size and complexity naturally evolve over time, they are **marathons rather than sprints**. There will be moments to move forward decisively and others where it is important to pause, listen, and adjust. Recognizing that balance early on is essential, particularly when working with partners who will be engaged for the long term.

It is also important to understand and leverage the strengths of your team. Contributing where your expertise is strongest and allowing others to lead in their areas of specialization **builds trust and improves overall effectiveness**. For example, if a team member brings deep experience in early childhood program delivery while another's strength lies in policy, each perspective plays a valuable and distinct role. Respecting those roles allows the team to function more cohesively and ultimately leads to better outcomes.



Denise Winters, Leadership Team

Rise Vallejo exists because we believed, **together**, that our children, families, and providers deserve spaces that reflect dignity, possibility, and hope. My advice to everyone who walks through these doors is simple: **lead with relationships, stay rooted in community, and never lose sight of why this work matters**.

This center was built through partnership, persistence, and a shared commitment to equity. Let it always be a place where families feel welcomed, providers feel supported, and children are seen, valued, and given the strongest possible start. When challenges arise, as they inevitably will, return to the **community voice** and to the purpose that brought us here.

The Rise Vallejo Early Learning & Community Resource Center is more than a building. It is an **investment in people**, in **trust**, and in the **future of this neighborhood**. Protect it, nurture it, and let it continue to rise alongside the families it serves.





Appendices

If you are reading this in a print version, please use this QR code to access all live links to resources included in the appendices. It will take you to the e-version of this playbook.



Scan Here 

Appendix A: Marketing and Communications



Resource Name and Link	Purpose	Creator
<u>Communications Plan</u>	Provide overview of how and when communication on updates to the construction progress and program developments as well as to promote the center to Solano County partners, community organizations, and residents Note: This was accompanied by a communication log to track progress	First 5 Solano
<u>Newsletters</u>	Share updates on progress of the project with commission, partners, and the community.	First 5 Solano produced; content regularly provided by Child Start, Inc.
<u>Provider Brief</u>	Outreach to local childcare providers	First 5 Solano, with ASR and Graphic Designer
<u>Rise Vallejo Overview, Brief</u>	Increase awareness of Rise Vallejo and provide a snapshot of what it will do	First 5 Solano, with ASR and Graphic Designer
<u>Website</u>	Share information with community on progress of Rise Vallejo	First 5 Solano, with ASR and Graphic Designer; taken over by Child Start, Inc.

Note: Samples will contain the names Beverly Hills Elementary School (original name of school site) as well as Vallejo Early Learning Center and Early Learning Center. These names were used before the team agreed upon the branding for Rise Vallejo.

Appendix B: Project Documentation



Resource Name and Link	Purpose	Creator
<u>Site Identification PPT</u>	Initial overview of school site, stats, location, and transportation routes	First 5 Solano
<u>Project Briefing (General)</u>	Overview of project, including background, project description, partners, timeline, funding request, and due diligence	First 5 Solano
<u>Project Briefing (For Potential Partner)</u>	Customized overview of project, including background, project description, partners, funding request	First 5 Solano
<u>Renovation List</u>	Provide insight on the general construction approach and renovations for Rise Vallejo	Child Start, Inc.
<u>Due Diligence Review</u>	Solano County General Services review of project and site to determine feasibility and required future actions	First 5 Solano; Solano County General Services
<u>Letter of Support</u>	Vallejo City Unified School District review of school locations and impacts of transitioning school site into ELC.	Vallejo City Unified School District

Note: Samples will contain the names Beverly Hills Elementary School (original name of school site) as well as Vallejo Early Learning Center and Early Learning Center. These names were used before the team agreed upon the branding for Rise Vallejo.

Appendix C: Funding and Costs



Resource Name and Link	Purpose	Creator
<u>Information Sheet for Funders</u>	Provide information to funders on project goals, partners, timeline, purpose, opportunity, and budget	First 5 Solano, Navalta Media
<u>Project Budget and Funding Updates</u>	Project tracking sheet	First 5 Solano
<u>Funding Request Sample</u>	State earmark request sent to Senator Dodd for \$1 million ask	First 5 Solano
<u>Funding Request Sample 2</u>	State earmark request sent to Senator Dodd for \$4 million ask	First 5 Solano
<u>Grant Request</u>	Request for grant funds sent to City of Vallejo	First 5 Solano
<u>Operational Costs</u>	Initial estimate to track operational costs to run Rise Vallejo	Child Start
<u>Funding Tracker</u>	Track funding received for Rise Vallejo	First 5 Solano

Note: Samples will contain the names Beverly Hills Elementary School (original name of school site) as well as Vallejo Early Learning Center and Early Learning Center. These names were used before the team agreed upon the branding for Rise Vallejo.

Appendix D: Resources for Providers



Resource Name and Link	Purpose	Creator
<u>Provider MOU</u>	Delineate the terms under which Child Start and local childcare provider will operate classrooms at the Rise Vallejo Center.	Child Start
<u>Provider Presentation</u>	Provide local providers information on joining the ELC	Child Start
<u>Provider Rubric</u>	Rubric used to assess providers as potential members of the Rise team	Child Start

Appendix E: Support Resources



Resource Name and Link	Purpose	Creator
<u>Organizational Readiness Assessment</u>	Distinguish the readiness level of organizations involved to take on a project of this magnitude	ASR; informed by First 5 Solano
<u>Community Readiness Assessment</u>	Identify readiness of a community to take on a project of this magnitude	ASR; informed by First 5 Solano
<u>Sample Pitch to Superintendent</u>	Align intention of this project with the school superintendent's priorities and goals	ASR; informed by First 5 Solano
<u>Comparison Photos</u>	Show the progress of the center by visualizing before and after photos of its development	First 5 Solano
<u>Community Indicator Data</u>	Identify areas of disparity and need in Solano County	First 5 Solano

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*Everything is possible if
you are open to anything.*

*-Lisette Estrella-Henderson,
Retired Solano County Superintendent
of Schools*

