

Dismantling Silos and Improving Equitable Access to Early Intervention Services for Children (Birth-Five)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

Every child deserves the opportunity to grow, learn, and thrive from the very beginning. Yet in San Francisco, too many young children with special needs are not receiving early intervention services when they need them most.

Early intervention is not optional. It is a federally protected right. But today, the systems responsible for delivering these services are fragmented, under-resourced, and difficult for families and educators to navigate. As a result, children miss critical developmental windows that shape their future learning and well-being.

To further examine these structural barriers, the San Francisco Early Intervention & Inclusion Equity Taskforce conducted a citywide survey of over 400 educators, administrators, and early childhood providers working directly with young children and families. Their experiences reveal a system under strain — one where disconnected agencies, insufficient funding, and limited data transparency prevent many children from accessing the services they are legally entitled to. These challenges disproportionately affect children with disabilities from multilingual, immigrant, and low-income communities.

The findings point to a clear conclusion: San Francisco must align systems, invest in inclusion, and strengthen accountability to ensure equitable access to early intervention services.

KEY FINDINGS

Fragmented Systems Delay Access to Services

Early intervention and special education services are spread across multiple agencies, making the referral process difficult for both providers and families to navigate. Limited coordination and communication between systems such as SFUSD, Golden Gate Regional Center, Early Head Start, Title V programs, and family childcare providers often lead to delays in assessments, eligibility decisions, and service delivery. As a result, even children who qualify for services may wait too long to receive support, leaving families to navigate a complex system with little guidance.

Logistical, Accessibility and Engagement Barriers Persist

Educators report that many families face significant barriers when trying to access early intervention services. Challenges such as language differences, transportation, scheduling conflicts, and navigating complex systems can make it difficult for families, especially working families, to participate in services. A lack of clear information, culturally responsive communication, and trust-building support can also discourage families from seeking help, particularly when stigma or fear around special education labels is present.

Insufficient Resources and Funding Undermine Supports

Many early childhood programs lack the funding and staffing needed to fully support children with special needs. Administrators report ongoing challenges recruiting and retaining specialized professionals, such as speech-language pathologists, early intervention specialists, and social-emotional learning experts, who are critical for inclusive classrooms. Without sustained funding for these roles, programs often rely on short-term grants or pilots, limiting their ability to provide timely, consistent, and high-quality support for children who need it most.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Fund inclusion at its true cost.

Inclusive early education requires staffing, training, and specialized expertise. San Francisco should adopt funding models that reflect the true cost of supporting children with disabilities in early learning settings, including smaller class sizes, specialized staff, and integrated support services.

2. Coordinate care across systems.

Families should not have to navigate multiple agencies alone. San Francisco should embed care coordinators within early childhood programs and community hubs to guide families from referral through evaluation and service delivery. These roles can bridge communication between early childhood providers, the school district, regional centers, and health agencies. Better coordination will reduce delays, support families, and ensure children receive services as quickly as possible.

3. Track data and ensure accountability.

San Francisco must build a shared data system that tracks early intervention referrals, eligibility, service timelines, and outcomes for children ages 0-5. Data should be publicly reported and disaggregated by race, language, disability status, and neighborhood. This transparency will help policymakers identify disparities, direct resources where they are most needed, and hold systems accountable for improving access.

PATH FORWARD

San Francisco has the opportunity to build a coordinated early childhood system that ensures every child receives timely early intervention and inclusive support. By strengthening care coordination, funding inclusion at its true cost, and improving data transparency, the city can reduce delays, close readiness gaps, and ensure families can access the services their children are entitled to.

Why it Matters

Children with disabilities and multilingual learners have the **lowest kindergarten readiness scores** in San Francisco.

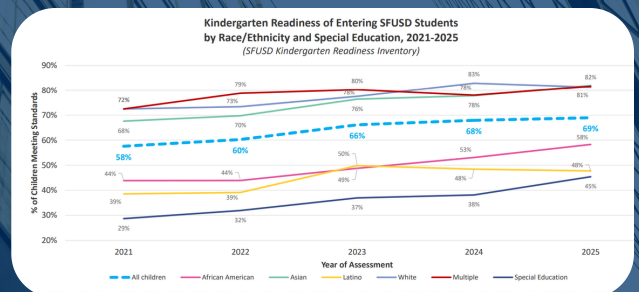
These gaps are **not about children's abilities**. They reflect **unequal access to early support, inclusive classrooms, and intervention services**.

When children receive the right support early, they are more likely to enter school ready to learn and thrive.

Investing in coordinated early intervention helps:

- Close readiness gaps
- Reduce long-term inequities
- Support the wellbeing of children and families across San Francisco

Kindergarten Readiness of Entering SFUSD Students



*Children cannot wait.
Act now. Align systems. Deliver equity.*

PARTICIPATING AGENCIES

- Compass Family Services
- Cross Cultural Family Center
- FACES SF
- Felton Institute
- Golden Gate Regional Center
- Good Samaritan Family Resource Center
- Kai Ming Head Start
- Linguistic Connections
- MNC Inspiring Success
- San Francisco Department of Early Childhood
- San Francisco Department of Public Health
- San Francisco Family Child Care Association
- San Francisco State University
- San Francisco Unified School District
- Support for Families of Children with Disabilities
- True Sunshine Preschool
- Wu Yee Children's Services



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