



To: Commissioners, First 5 Ventura County

From: Nani Oesterle, Program Manager

Date: May 21, 2020

Re: Recommendation to Modify Preschool Scholarship Criteria for FY 2020-21

Background

In February 2019, the Commission approved continued investment in preschool scholarships for families residing in Ojai Valley, Moorpark, and Simi Valley for FY 2019-21. Scholarships were formerly provided by the Neighborhoods for Learning in those communities due to limited access to publicly funded preschool programs. The Commission subsequently included Port Hueneme/South Oxnard in the scholarship initiative in June 2019 to mitigate the loss of a First 5 funded preschool program in that area. A total of 144 scholarships are available per year for this two-year transition strategy.

As of July 1, 2019, implementation of preschool scholarships transitioned from the Neighborhoods for Learning to Child Development Resources (CDR). Despite CDR's expertise in the administration of a voucher type program, uptake of scholarships by families was extremely low in Q1. Additional outreach led to an increase in families utilizing the scholarships; however, a significant underutilization of funds is projected for FY 2019-20. This is now further compounded by COVID-19. Except for one, all of the providers who had been issuing F5VC funded scholarships are currently closed, potentially for the remainder of the school year.

Given the outreach challenges seen when the scholarship program was only open to certain communities and the economic hardships being felt countywide due to COVID-19, staff are seeking opportunities to ensure that all 144 scholarships are used in FY 2020-21, giving more children the benefit of preschool before entering kindergarten. After consultation with CDR, staff recommend to eliminate the requirement that families live in one of the predesignated communities in order to receive a scholarship. This would allow any family in Ventura County to access a scholarship, regardless of their city of residence. Staff will work with CDR to create a process whereby families living in the communities of Moorpark, Simi Valley, Ojai, and Port Hueneme/South Oxnard will be prioritized for scholarships, as well as families demonstrating high economic need.

Recommendation

The recommended action would modify the existing criteria for First 5 Ventura County funded-preschool scholarships for FY 2020-21, making scholarships available to families countywide.