



Last Vote to First Dollar Toolkit

# Communications

Communication Matters! Tips for Sharing Your New Fund's Story and Success

November 2024

**CHILDREN'**   
FUNDING PROJECT

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## Introduction

Congratulations! The final votes have been tallied, and the members of your community have approved your measure to create a new [voter-approved children's fund](#). This is an exciting time for you and your community. Admittedly, though, shifting from a successful campaign to the process of establishing and activating your new children's fund may feel daunting. Fortunately, you are not alone. This toolkit offers resources, guidance, and advice for equitably implementing a voter-approved children's fund—starting after the final winning vote on election night through the distribution of the first fund dollar. This guide can support the transition teams and interim founding staff members tasked with launching new voter-approved children's funds. Initially, this toolkit will address four main areas—(1) program and policy design, (2) operations, (3) communications, and (4) evaluation and impact—but we hope to add additional guidance over time.

Establishing a voter-approved children's fund involves deeply engaging with the democratic process, building a strong and diverse coalition of support, and addressing the needs brought about by systemic inequities within communities. While local children's funds do not fully finance cradle-to-career systems on their own, they offer the flexibility and infrastructure communities need to maximize multiple funding sources and fill some of the gaps left by insufficient federal and state funding.

Once voter-approved children's funds win at the ballot, they face an intense implementation period. That intensity stems from the relatively short timeframes to launch a new fund and the sheer volume of work needed to get money into the community. The timeframe for distributing the first dollar can range anywhere from nine to 18 months. In that timeframe, children's funds need to create the systems and infrastructure necessary to administer funding effectively and equitably. That can include creating new agencies or independent nonprofit organizations, building fiscal and technological infrastructure, creating governing boards, and so much more.

In some cases, existing organizations or government agencies administer newly approved children's funds. These types of situations don't require a community to create an entirely new organization; however, even an existing organization may still face challenges if asked to dramatically expand an existing program or adopt the task of administering significant new dollars. For instance, [Agenda for Children in New Orleans](#) had

to scale its budget from \$6 million (\$3 million in local revenue and \$3 million in state matching funding) for the City Seats child care program to about \$42 million after voters approved a new local tax to expand the program. The new local tax revenue increased the City Seats budget by \$21 million and was also eligible for [an additional \\$21 million in matching funds from the state](#) of Louisiana. While Agenda for Children had existing infrastructure for administering the program funds, it needed to scale six times more than the original budget!

Voter-approved children's funds also are often under a unique amount of public scrutiny during the set up and implementation processes. It takes an enormous amount of public education and attention to pass an initiative on the ballot, and that attention does not always fade after a campaign wins. In some cases, scrutiny will intensify, particularly when well-funded opposition existed during the campaign or when voters are particularly concerned about accountability for government spending. Being in the public limelight can exacerbate any challenges and pitfalls you may encounter during implementation. However, it also can rally continued enthusiasm for your fund's work and ensure the creation of a fair, equitable, community-centered program.

**“A document like this implementation toolkit can help establish goals and objectives with the focus on children, based on solid community data and input, that provides the foundation for success.”**

– **Cindy Arenberg Seltzer**, president/CEO, Children's Services Council of Broward County

Children's Funding Project created this toolkit in direct response to requests for support from the communities transitioning from campaign to implementation mode, including members of our [ballot measure cohort](#) and [voter-approved children's fund community of practice](#). We created this resource through collaboration with leaders of established voter-approved children's funds and the experts who have supported them through the most pressing implementation challenges. “A document like this implementation toolkit can help establish goals

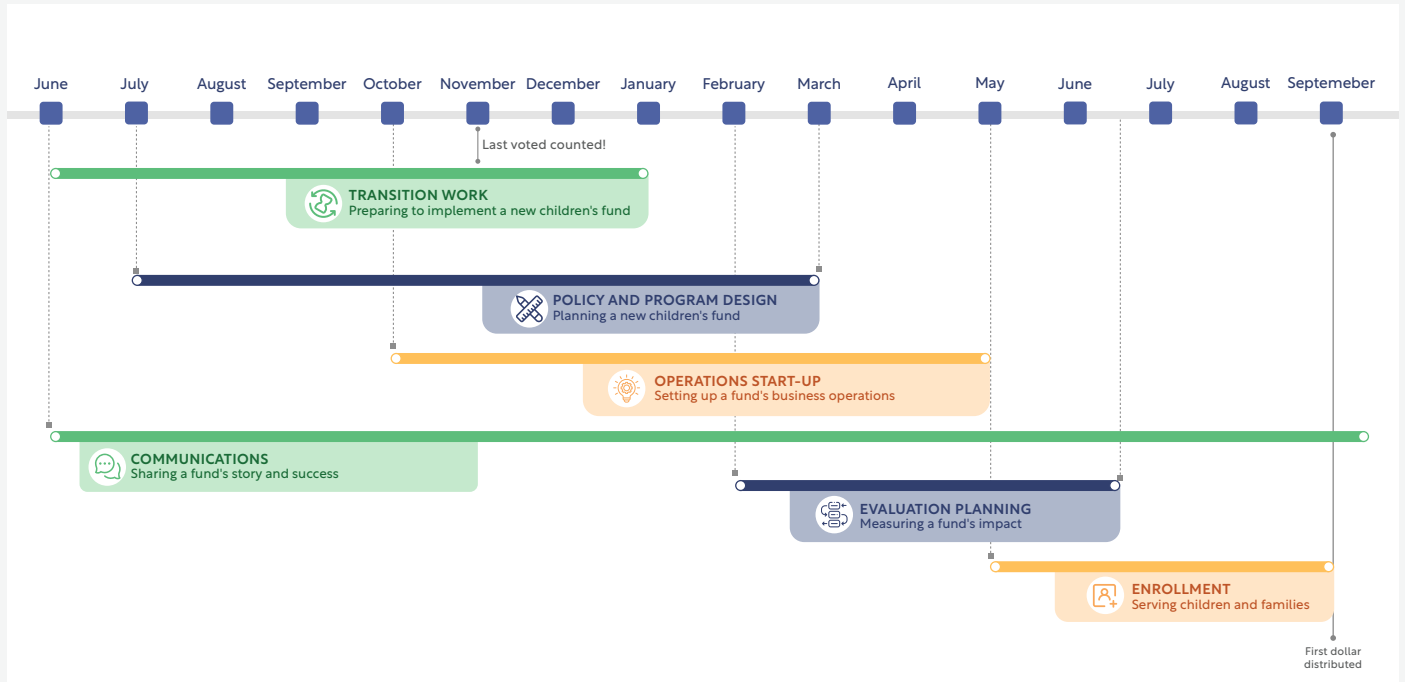
and objectives with the focus on children, based on solid community data and input, that provides the foundation for success,” says Cindy Arenberg Seltzer, who has served as the president/CEO of the Children’s Services Council of Broward County, FL, since 2000. We hope to continue building additional resources for this toolkit as we learn more about the needs new voter-approved children’s funds face as they establish their programs.

## Timeline for Implementing a Children’s Fund

This timeline reflects the accelerated timeframe many of you may face if your fund aligns with a November ballot measure election. The timeline would be different if your ballot measure initiative takes place during a different time of year. Others may have up to 18 months to implement their fund before distributing the first dollar for direct services. In those cases, the timeline is expanded.

- Transition Work (eight months): Starts five months before election night
- Policy and Program Design (eight to 10 months): Starts four months before election night through four to six months after winning
- Operations Start-Up (seven to eight months): Starts one month before election night through five to six months after winning
- Communications (ongoing): Consistent from pre- to post-election and through the first dollar distributed
- Evaluation Planning (five to six months): Starts two or three months after election night and lasts about five to six months

**Figure 1: Timeline for Implementing a Children’s Fund**



# Sharing Your New Fund's Story and Success

## Section 1: Communications Overview

Successful ballot measure campaigns require an intense focus on communications. It's one of the key elements that contributed to your victory! But the need for thoughtful and strategic communications about your voter-approved children's fund does not end after Election Day. After the final votes are counted, it's time to plan how you will communicate about the implementation phase of your new fund.

Once the victory celebration ends, attention on your fund—and support for it—easily can fade if no one hears about your progress and impact. Consequently, it is important to communicate with your local leaders and community members about the implementation process and your fund's continued activity to nurture their ongoing support, especially if your fund faces a future reauthorization vote. Sharing your implementation plan, goals, progress toward key milestones, initial successes, and long-term impact builds excitement about your fund and the positive contributions it will make in your community. It also introduces you to the families and community-based providers who will benefit directly from your fund's work.

Communicating about your fund's implementation also promotes transparency and sets realistic expectations for the timeline of activities. This builds trust with your local community members and leaders, highlights your fund's accountability to taxpayers, and shows that you are using public revenue responsibly and as intended by the voters who approved your initiative.

Most importantly, communicating proactively about your fund's work allows you to control your message and your fund's story—because if you don't control it someone else will.

## Section 2: Key Questions to Answer

### WHO ARE THE PRIMARY AUDIENCES YOU NEED TO REACH WITH YOUR COMMUNICATIONS?

Effective communication starts by identifying the groups and/or individuals you need to inform about your fund's progress and the program(s) it will support. Most likely that will include multiple audiences. Some of those audiences will be internal audiences like your city or county council members and staff members at local government agencies. Other audiences will

be external audiences including prospective program participants, families, service providers, campaign supporters, and members of your broader community.

### WHAT DOES EACH OF THOSE AUDIENCES NEED TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR PROGRAM AND FUND'S PROGRESS?

Do not assume that your audiences understand all aspects of your fund simply because you won your ballot measure campaign. A key part of your implementation communications will focus on educating your various audiences about the purpose, goals, value, and progress of your new fund and the program(s) it will support. At this stage, it's important to think about the needs, questions, and concerns each audience has and use that to inform your communications.

### HOW FREQUENTLY DOES EACH AUDIENCE NEED TO HEAR FROM YOU?

You probably will communicate with your various audiences at different times. For instance, your fund's ordinance or other founding documents may dictate how frequently you communicate with your fund's oversight or governance body like your city council. By contrast, you probably have greater flexibility to determine when to share updates with your broader community. Whatever timeline you choose, make sure to communicate with all your audiences regularly to keep them informed and engaged with your fund's progress.



### WHO ARE THE BEST MESSENGERS TO DELIVER INFORMATION TO EACH AUDIENCE AND DO THEY REFLECT THE DIFFERENT POPULATIONS REPRESENTED IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

For each audience you need to reach, identify the individuals and groups best suited to connect with that audience. This will ensure that audience members receive information about your fund from a messenger they trust. Possible messengers might include your program staff or fund leadership, elected county or city leaders, noteworthy community members, potential program providers, or prospective family participants. Successful messengers from your ballot measure campaign also can serve as initial messengers for your new fund during the implementation stage.

When selecting your messengers, make sure to choose individuals who represent the different populations who live and work in your community, including groups whose voices or perspectives historically have

been overlooked or underrepresented. Additionally, make sure your messengers provide information in different formats that are accessible to their intended audience(s). This could include presenting information in written, audio, and visual formats; using messengers who are fluent in the community's commonly spoken languages; and making sign language interpreters, video captioning and narration, and braille materials available.

### WHAT COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS WILL YOU USE TO REACH YOUR AUDIENCES?

Your communications plan should use a variety of methods to share information about your new fund. Start with a website, social media accounts, and an email marketing tool. Then, depending on your budget, consider using paid advertising on TV, radio, print, or online or direct mail flyers to promote your fund's program(s). Think about the role that earned media—TV and newspaper/magazine stories—can play in your communications outreach too. You also can share your fund's work at public community events. Surveying your audiences and testing different communications channels can help identify the sources your audiences use the most.

### Section 3: Potential Problems/Pitfalls to Avoid

- The implementation team does not include a communications professional. Consequently, the fund does not create a plan to share news about its progress and successes, and community members forget about the fund, pull back support, and/or do not participate in programs.
- The fund does not establish a clear brand identity and consistent messaging. Spokespeople and outreach materials send mixed or conflicting messages that confuse community members about the fund's purpose and activities.
- The fund does not prepare for addressing lingering opposition that carries over from the campaign and/or new opposition that surfaces during the implementation phase.
- The implementation team commits to unrealistic communications activities that it does not have the time, capacity, expertise, or budget to support and execute successfully.

## Section 4: Action Step and Case Study

### ACTION STEP: MAKE COMMUNICATIONS AN EQUAL PARTNER WITH YOUR PROGRAM, POLICY RELATIONS, FISCAL, EVALUATION, AND ADMINISTRATION TEAMS.

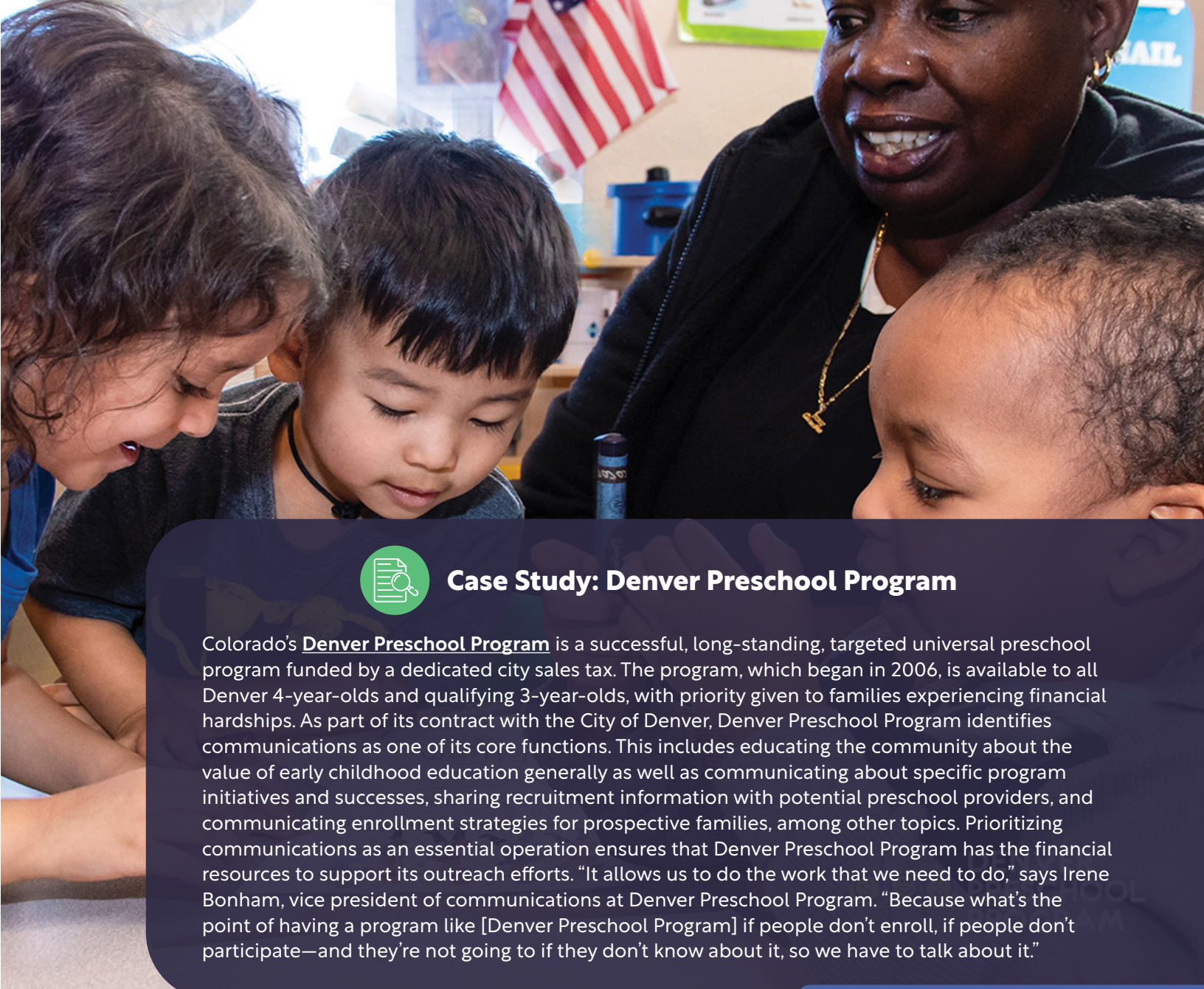
To communicate effectively about your fund, your communications team must understand your fund's programs, operations, and goals. Your communications experts also need access to the key information your audiences need to know and the tools to get that information to the appropriate recipients. That means aligning your communications team with your fund's other internal teams, allowing your communications professional(s) to partner with the specialists leading that work, and including communications representatives in your fund's overall planning and implementation activities.

For example, communications and program teams should collaborate on the rollout of program announcements, the framing of information for potential service providers, and the distribution of registration details for families interested in enrolling in new programs. Similarly, your evaluators can equip your communications experts with data about your fund's performance that they can use to showcase your fund's impact and reinforce its value in the community.

Remember, effective communication requires time and resources just like your fund's other operations. Positioning your communications functions as an integral part of your work ensures that your fund has the tools and expertise it needs to communicate effectively with your community and local leaders. Read the case study about Denver Preschool Program on the next page to see how one voter-approved children's fund integrates communications with its other functions.



Photo Credit: Best Starts for Kids



## Case Study: Denver Preschool Program

Colorado's **Denver Preschool Program** is a successful, long-standing, targeted universal preschool program funded by a dedicated city sales tax. The program, which began in 2006, is available to all Denver 4-year-olds and qualifying 3-year-olds, with priority given to families experiencing financial hardships. As part of its contract with the City of Denver, Denver Preschool Program identifies communications as one of its core functions. This includes educating the community about the value of early childhood education generally as well as communicating about specific program initiatives and successes, sharing recruitment information with potential preschool providers, and communicating enrollment strategies for prospective families, among other topics. Prioritizing communications as an essential operation ensures that Denver Preschool Program has the financial resources to support its outreach efforts. "It allows us to do the work that we need to do," says Irene Bonham, vice president of communications at Denver Preschool Program. "Because what's the point of having a program like [Denver Preschool Program] if people don't enroll, if people don't participate—and they're not going to if they don't know about it, so we have to talk about it."

Photo Credit: Denver Preschool Program

### Section 5: Action Step and Case Study

**ACTION STEP: ESTABLISH THE MESSAGING, LANGUAGE, VOICE, AND TONE YOU WILL USE TO TALK ABOUT YOUR FUND'S WORK AND KEEP THOSE ELEMENTS CONSISTENT ACROSS ALL YOUR COMMUNICATIONS.**

During your ballot measure campaign, your campaign manager probably emphasized the importance of message discipline and using the same language and themes to describe your initiative across your campaign materials. That advice remains equally important as you implement your fund. Your messaging and word choice define your fund's brand and the image you convey to your various audiences. Being consistent shows that your fund has a clear sense of purpose and that all members

of the implementation team are working toward the same goals. Make sure your core messages are clear and easy to understand. Shorter is better in this case! Meanwhile, using strengths-based and human-based language can counter misconceptions and stereotypes some community members may have about your fund's purpose and/or the populations it will serve. Successful messaging requires understanding your audiences' values and motivations so you can tailor your messages to emphasize the aspects of your program that resonate with distinct groups. Polling, community meetings, and an advisory committee can provide helpful input about the messages that speak to different audiences. Read the case study on the next page to learn how Best Starts for Kids created its messaging.





## Case Study: Best Starts for Kids

Since its inception in 2015, [Best Starts for Kids in King County, WA](#), has supported more than 500,000 children, youth, and families; partnered with more than 500 organizations; and launched more than 570 community-led programs to support the county's children. When Best Starts for Kids developed its core language and messaging, the fund's implementation team did not want to portray the fund as an effort focused solely on prevention and intervention. Instead, the team wanted to focus on promoting well-being. This guiding philosophy helped the team distill Best Starts for Kids' purpose down to a simple clear message: "to support every baby born or child raised in King County to reach adulthood happy, healthy, safe, and thriving." The words "happy, healthy, safe, and thriving" became the mantra and frame for all communications. As a result, all [messaging](#) intentionally avoided deficit language—words like disadvantaged and underserved—and used uplifting and empowering language focused on health and well-being. [The fund's style guide](#) also included guidance for capturing empowering community photos and selecting images that reflected the fund's messaging themes. The implementation team then collected feedback about its messaging through community conversations to ensure the messages resonated with the fund's various audiences and reflected their needs and perspectives.

"Rather than explain Best Starts in terms of outcomes, or preventing crisis, we framed the goals of the initiative in a straightforward, and positive way," explains Sheila Ater Capestany, division director of the Children, Youth, and Young Adults division with King County Department of Community and Human Services. "Our tagline—Happy, Healthy, Safe, and Thriving—is a great example of this approach. It describes our goals for King County children and young people in relatable language. And we see its effectiveness as community members, subject matter experts, and our county executive all repeat this tagline and our messages. The strength of the positive message helped us build a foundation for our work and continues to support our approach to this day,"



Photo Credit: Best Starts for Kids

### Section 6: Action Step and Case Study

#### **ACTION STEP: INCORPORATE RESPONSES TO EXISTING AND POTENTIAL OPPOSITION INTO YOUR COMMUNICATIONS PLAN.**

Even if your fund's campaign won by a landslide victory, skepticism and distrust can surface as community members wait to see their tax dollars at work. Consequently, it is important to identify lingering, new, and potential opposition to your fund and prepare responses to those concerns as part of your implementation communications. Maintaining strong community connections provides valuable feedback about your fund's work and can uncover opposition, critiques, and the reasons behind them. These community connections also will help you distinguish between pressing concerns about your fund that require an immediate response and minor

criticisms you can monitor. Also, do not assume that all community members understand the history and evolution of your fund. Countering opposition may mean educating or reminding your audiences about the reasons your fund operates a certain way and reaffirming your ultimate vision and goals. Other responses may include clarifying misinformation or misrepresentation of information, reframing a critique, or acknowledging a critique as a limitation but one that does not diminish the importance of your initiative. Communicate facts clearly and accurately and when activities don't transpire as intended explain why. Often, critics simply need more information to better understand the benefits and intentions of your effort or want reassurance that the initiative is fulfilling its promises. To see an example, read the Pre-K 4 SA case study on the next page.



## Case Study: Pre-K 4 SA

In 2012, voters in San Antonio, TX, levied a  $\frac{1}{8}$  cent sales tax to establish a citywide early childhood education program called **Pre-K 4 SA**. The program offers free preschool, meals, and transportation for qualifying children, as well as a grant program and job training for teachers. Initially, opponents of Pre-K 4 SA criticized the program's cost. The implementation team countered this criticism in several ways. First, the team highlighted the broader benefits and reach of the fund's dollars. In addition to providing preschool to the 2,000 children served in Pre-K 4 SA's centers, the fund also supports children in other programs through its grants and professional development services for teachers. Next, Pre-K 4 SA acknowledged that it provides a high-quality program and that high-quality services cost money. Finally, Pre-K 4 SA analyzed its costs in comparison to other preschool programs to show that its program costs less money than some lower-quality programs. The messaging worked, and **in 2020 73% of voters reauthorized the sales tax that funds Pre-K 4 SA**. "Program leaders need to walk toward the danger," says Sarah Baray, CEO of Pre-K 4 SA. "Critics' concerns can be based in either lack of understanding or misinformation. Communication between program leaders and critics builds capacity for voters to speak from an informed perspective and raise legitimate concerns that, once addressed, lead to program growth."

Photo Credit: Pre-K 4 SA

Children's Funding Project is a nonprofit social impact organization that helps communities, states, and Native nations expand equitable opportunities for children and youth through strategic public financing. [childrensfundingproject.org](https://childrensfundingproject.org)

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