

# Leaders and Champions

## The Role of Local Policymakers in Strategic Public Financing

October 2022

Over the past decade, visionary mayors, council members, county commissioners, and municipal administrators have led and/or championed sustainable public revenue generation that supports critical programs and services for the infants, toddlers, children, and youth in their communities. These policymakers work collaboratively with advocates, funders, and families to

- identify and track their community's existing financial resources,
- quantify the costs associated with new and existing programs that serve children, and
- pursue innovative approaches to generate additional public funding to meet their community's goals.

Together, these three actions allow communities to fund services for children and youth in sustainable and equitable ways through a process we call strategic public financing.

### What Is Strategic Public Financing?

[Strategic public financing](#) is a process that assigns a cost to the goals and policy priorities a community has for its children and youth—and identifies ways to cover that cost. The process is guided by three essential questions:

1. How much funding do we currently have?
2. How much funding do we need?
3. How do we fill the gap between our existing funding and the amount we need to achieve our goals?

On the surface, these questions may seem simple. But answering them requires input and collaboration from local leaders inside and outside of government to develop a comprehensive picture of the financial resources available to support children.



### How Can Policymakers Support Strategic Public Financing?

Policymakers play a critical role at each stage of the strategic public financing process and can guide their communities as they answer the three central questions mentioned previously. Because of their influence, policymakers' public support and ability to bring together relevant community members can make or break strategic public financing efforts.

#### Step 1: How Much Funding Do We Currently Have?

To find out how much funding a community currently has, policymakers can advocate for a [state and/or local fiscal map](#). A [fiscal map](#) is a tool for analyzing public spending at the city, county, state, or federal level.

- Policymakers in cities and counties that have a children's cabinet can task those leaders with overseeing the fiscal mapping process.
- If the community does not have such a group, policymakers can consider forming a cabinet or assembling a group of community leaders, advocates, and [intermediary organizations](#) to work on the fiscal map [collaboratively](#).

#### Step 2: How Much Funding Do We Need?

To find out how much funding a community needs to achieve its goals for children, policymakers can advocate for [cost models](#). A cost model measures the true cost of equitably implementing, maintaining, or expanding a program or service for kids by examining a program's requirements, staffing needs, and other factors that influence costs. Ideally, communities and states should commission cost models for all the various programs and services they hope to implement for children and youth.



- Policymakers can use cost models to advocate for additional investments to support children and youth and inform their locality’s budgeting [process](#).

### Step 3: How Do We Fill the Gap Between Existing and Needed Funding?

Communities can generate revenue in multiple ways ranging from establishing a dedicated source of funding for programs and services (known as a [voter-approved children’s fund](#)) to raising a marginal new tax or securing a budget set aside. Policymakers serve as important leaders and champions to help their communities identify which approach is the best choice for their city or county.

Policymakers can leverage their influence by

- introducing a measure to their city council/county commission to place a [voter-approved children’s fund](#) on the ballot,
- lending support for such a fund or other new source of funding through an official endorsement,
- advocating that their city or county dedicate revenue generated from specific sources toward programs and services for kids, or
- promoting a [new revenue initiative](#) generally.

## Making the Case for Strategic Public Financing

Voters want to see their state and local governments invest more resources in [child care, youth mental health services, out-of-school programs, and other opportunities for children and youth](#)—and they’re willing to contribute their own tax dollars to make that a reality. Policymakers can draw on [findings from our national voter poll](#) and use our [ready-made presentation slides](#) to build support for strategic public financing. They also can use the talking points below:

1. Supporting the development of healthy, happy, and thriving children and youth means more than funding only K-12 education. It means comprehensive, accessible, and robust funding for early childhood education, meaningful out-of-school programs, and career skill-building programs too. If we don’t think about our children’s development in this way, we will fail them.
2. Research continues to demonstrate that services for young children provide the biggest return on investment for public dollars. But these less expensive and preventive services often do not receive the resources they need, which leads to reactive interventions that cost taxpayers more in the long run.
3. The foundation of real budgeting is knowing the actual cost of programs and services for children

and youth and identifying the sources of revenue available to pay for them.

## Polymakers in Action

**In San Antonio, TX:** Former [Mayor Julian Castro](#) [championed a 1/8 cent sales tax that now generates up to \\$31 million per year to fund pre-K](#). “For the purpose of education in a state that ranks about 45th or 47th in terms of per-pupil spending ... it made a lot of sense to invest this small amount for a big reward in the future.” –former San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro  
Read more in our case study [San Antonio, TX’s Keep Pre-K 4 SA: A November 2020 Ballot Measure Case Study](#).

**In Franklin County, OH:** Commissioner Erica Crawley championed the establishment of a child care support team to develop recommendations to invest federal COVID-relief dollars into early childhood education initiatives. This led to a historic investment of [\\$22.5 million in American Rescue Plan funding in the county](#). Read more in our profile [Expanding Access to High-Quality Child Care in Franklin County, OH](#).

**In Multnomah County, OR:** County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson successfully championed a campaign to create a voter-approved children’s fund to pay for preschool services in the county. [The campaign succeeded in 2020](#) when 64% of voters approved a new high-income earners’ tax currently projected to raise \$160 million annually by 2026. Read more in our case study [Multnomah County, OR’s Preschool for All: A November 2020 Ballot Measure Case Study](#).

**In King County, WA:** King County Executive Dow Constantine led [Best Starts for Kids](#), a 2015 voter-approved initiative to ensure every child and youth in the county has the opportunity to pursue lifelong success. (More than 62% of voters approved the Best Starts for Kids levy renewal in August 2021.) Since its inception, the program has supported more than a half million children, youth, and families; partnered with more than 500 organizations; and launched more than 570 community-led programs to support the well-being and health of the county’s children.



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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