

# MERCED SUN-STAR

## Opinion

# Martha MacKenzie Hermsillo: Merced's First 5 programs invest in children's future

BY MARTHA MACKENZIE HERMSILLO

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Fifteen years ago, voters approved Proposition 10, The California Children and Families Act, affirming their support for a guaranteed revenue stream dedicated to the benefit of young children. Proposition 10 created a "Children and Families Commission" in every California County to manage the investment of revenue derived from special taxes on tobacco products "for the purposes of promoting, supporting and improving the early development of children from the prenatal stage to five years of age."

The statewide program is now known as "First 5," in reference to the tremendous importance of the first five years of a child's life when 90 percent of brain development occurs. The value of investment in these early childhood years has been well-documented – for individuals as well as to society – in the form of better health outcomes, higher economic productivity and reduced spending on foster care, special education and crime.

James Heckman, whose research has earned him the Nobel Prize, demonstrated through research that for every \$1 spent on young children, society gets a \$7 return. All across California, First 5 commissions are working to make these life-changing investments in support of the optimal development of children.

Proposition 10 established three priorities: school readiness, children's health and family support. But the law also prioritized local control, authorizing each county commission to determine the particular needs of young children in their communities and how best to help meet those needs.

Over the last 15 years, the First 5 Merced County Commission has directed our portion of the Proposition 10 tax revenue toward a wide variety of programs, including:

**School Readiness:** Services to parents and children to improve readiness for kindergarten, including preschool, summer bridge and home-visit programs.

**Screening, Referral and Early Intervention:** Encouraging early developmental, medical and other service connections for children.

**Health Access:** Increasing access to health services and resources through health insurance, transportation and consultation.

**Parenting Education:** Providing education and home visits to give parents and guardians information and resources.

**Provider Education and Training** – Working with partners to support training for community medical, mental health and child care providers.

First 5 Merced County has also supported numerous programs and projects in local communities to highlight the importance of young children, including the Annual Children’s Summit, the Children’s Movement business engagement work and Week of the Young Child countywide celebrations. First 5 Merced County also supports the professional development of educators of young children and training for medical and mental health providers.

First 5 Merced County has invested millions in infants, toddlers and preschoolers and, as voters mandated, all of these programs for children and families were funded with monies that would not have been available from any other source. This unprecedented investment in our youngest children – and in the future – has made First 5 one of the most significant and effective funders of early childhood development programs in the state of California.

With one in four California children living in poverty, there is more work to do. We look forward to working with the community to ensure that every child has the opportunity for good health, an exemplary education and the full support of family and the community.

*Hermosillo is executive director of Merced County’s First 5 program.*