



Merced County Constructing Connections

A Case Study for the ABCD Initiative



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PREPARED FOR:

LOW INCOME INVESTMENT FUND: ABCD INITIATIVE

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Preface

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to the staff and members of the Merced County Constructing Connections Collaborative with whom we spoke for their gracious participation in the process that resulted in this case study. We especially thank Christie Hendricks, Merced County Constructing Connections Project Coordinator, who organized the meetings and interviews and provided information and guidance. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the staff of the ABCD Initiative at the Low Income Investment Fund and the ABCD Evaluation Advisory Committee for their guidance, as well as the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and First 5 California for their generous support of this work.

ABOUT BTW *INFORMING CHANGE*

At BTW we are driven by our purpose of *informing change* in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. We work collaboratively with our clients, providing strategic consulting services to inform organizational effectiveness and learning. Our information-based services include:

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- Evaluation,
- Performance Monitoring System Design and
- Applied Research.

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Introduction

This case study is part of a larger evaluation of the Low Income Investment Fund's (LIIF) Affordable Buildings for Children's Development (ABCD) Initiative that is being conducted by BTW *informing change*, a Berkeley-based consulting firm that specializes in providing information-based strategic consulting services to nonprofits and philanthropic organizations. The ABCD Initiative employs a combination of grants, loans, technical assistance, training and advocacy to facilitate and accelerate the development of quality child care spaces for California's children.

CONSTRUCTING CONNECTIONS—AN OVERVIEW

Constructing Connections is one of the ABCD Initiative's primary program components. Through Constructing Connections, ABCD provides funds to ten lead agencies serving eleven California counties that enable each community to convene a collaborative of child care providers, community developers, civic leaders, small businesses, educators, advocates and others. Constructing Connections is predicated on two major principles:

1. "Effective child care facilities development takes place locally, making it necessary to build community capacity to do this work;" and,
2. "Collaboration between the child care and community development sectors is essential to both the health of the child care industry and the health of the local community."¹

ABCD intentionally selected sites that had already demonstrated "readiness" to engage in this work, including "evidence of efforts by the lead/partner organizations to create new child care spaces" and "existing capacity of the lead agency and its partners to implement a Constructing Connections Program site." Once sites were selected, ABCD expected sites to achieve a range of specific goals over the planned five year grant period including:

¹ These principles and other intentions for Constructing Connections sites described herein are from *Low Income Investment Fund: Constructing Connections RFP, 2004*.

Within One Year

- An assessment of the community's child care facilities needs.
- A catalog of local resources (e.g., funding, expertise, policies) that support facility financing and development.
- An inventory of local barriers to child care facilities development.

Within Two Years

- A detailed plan to overcome local barriers to child care facilities development, including policy recommendations to local and regional governments.

Within Three Years

- At least one new facility constructed and providing child care.
- A pipeline or stream of child care facilities in various stages of development.

Within Five Years

- A systematic, streamlined, institutionalized approach to assisting child care facilities development.

Program sites were also asked to:

- Appoint staff who will be available and responsible for coordinating the work and participating in Constructing Connections activities.
- Participate in quarterly Learning Community sessions (some in person, some by teleconference) of program sites for peer learning and support.
- Participate in conferences, training sessions, etc. as needed to share knowledge/experience gained through participation in Constructing Connections.
- Participate in policy development and advocacy relating to child care facilities development and operating subsidies for child care programs.

ABCD provides a matching grant of up to \$75,000 per year to each site to support the Collaborative in meeting these program expectations. In addition, ABCD provides each site with materials and customized technical assistance and convenes a Learning Community of Constructing Connections lead agency staff to achieve peer learning and information exchange. Each site has a budget of \$10,000 to hire pre-approved professional consultants to support local capacity building activities.

Since the inception of ABCD, there have been two cohorts of Constructing Connection sites. The first cohort began in 2004 and included six lead agencies; a second cohort came online a year later and brought four additional lead agencies serving five communities into the project.

THIS CASE STUDY

Merced County's Constructing Connections Collaborative was selected as one of two sites for a case study review. The site is a member of the second cohort, and represents a community facing rapid growth and development.

The purpose of this case study is to tell the story of the Merced community as it has engaged in the Constructing Connections process. What are the important milestones of its early evolution? What are the ingredients of its early success? What have the challenges been and what does the community think will be required going forward to ensure a successful result? The evaluation design calls for conducting a follow-up case study one year from now to document changes and learn how challenges have been overcome, problems solved, new challenges undertaken and successes achieved. Over time, this story will be useful to gain an understanding of the stages of development for a Constructing Connections site, facilitate reflection and learning, and help prepare other communities to embark on this journey.

This case study provides a portrait of the Constructing Connections experience and the early care and education system in Merced County. This portrait is based on the materials, experiences and insights shared by those who agreed to participate in this process.

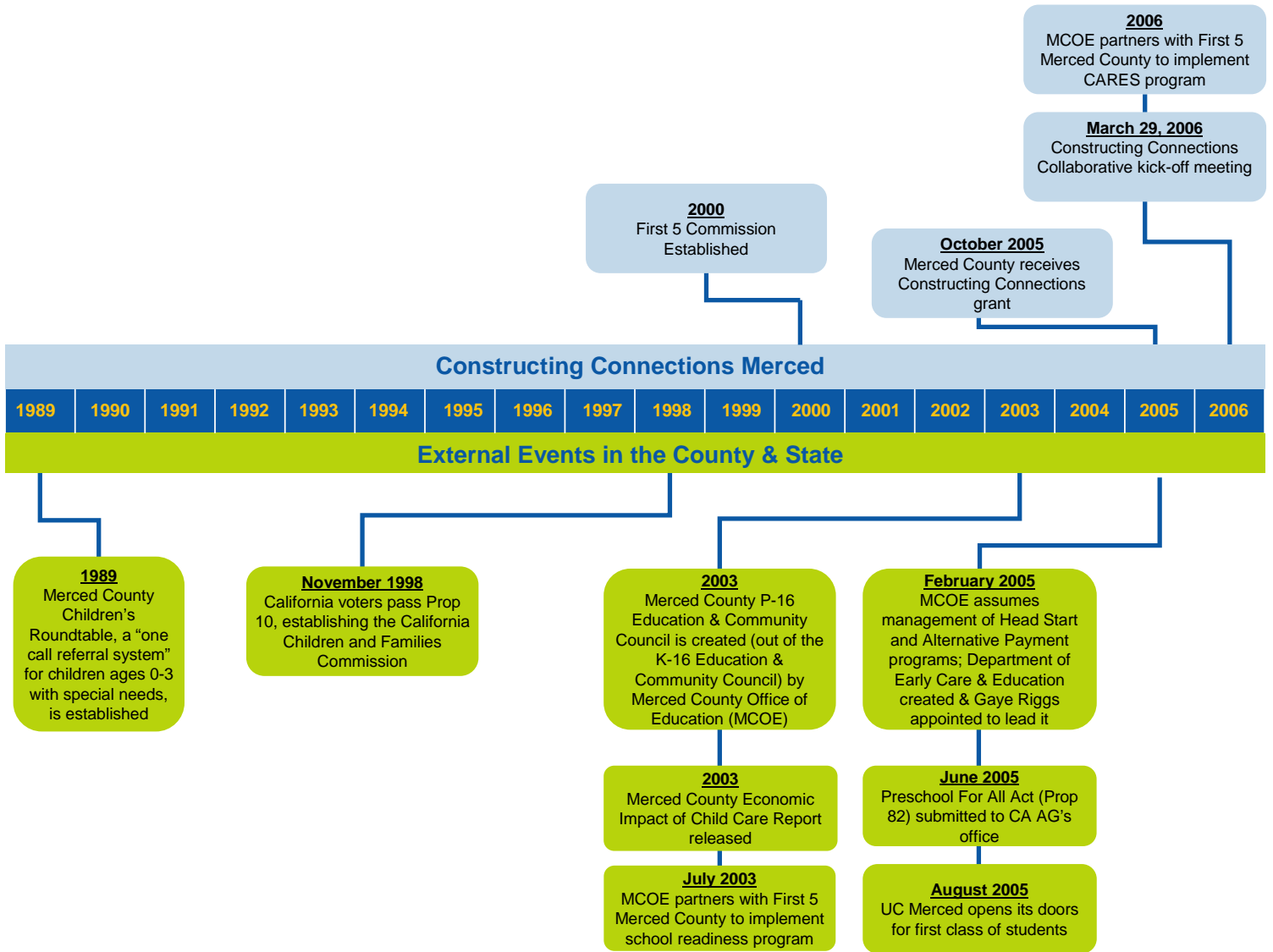
BTW collected the data for this case study through interviews and site visits and by reviewing written materials. On June 12 and 13, 2006, Alex Hildebrand, BTW *informing change* Associate, traveled to Merced County and spent two days observing a Constructing Connections Collaborative meeting, observing a Merced County First 5 Commission strategic planning session and conducting in-person interviews with key stakeholders of the Constructing Connections project.²

This case study highlights several factors influencing the development of the Merced County Constructing Connections Collaborative, including key social and demographic circumstances in the county, the early childhood education infrastructure in the county prior to the arrival of Constructing Connections and key dynamics affecting the leadership and operations of the Collaborative. The case study presents these factors in a chronological

² See Appendix A for a list of the interview participants.

sequence, from the 1980's to the present, as one of the intentions for this case study is to prompt serious discussions around the anticipated path of the Collaborative in the coming year. The "Timeline of Major Events in the Life of Merced County Constructing Connections" below is a graphic depiction of these factors.

Timeline for Constructing Connections and Related Child Care Events in Merced County 1989-2006



Prologue: Observing a Hotspot of Growth

I was meeting with Christie Hendricks in her office in the last hours of my visit to Merced. She sat behind her desk, still energetic after two long days of work that included activities ranging from facilitating the Constructing Connections Collaborative meeting to helping her staff process child care provider applications for the Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Educational Standards (CARES) professional development program. Her demeanor reflected a mix of enthusiasm for her work and exhaustion from firing on all cylinders since 6:30 a.m. on Monday morning.

Hendricks was ruminating on the value of co-locating child care at transportation centers when we got on the topic of University of California (UC) Merced, the brand new campus located just outside the city's edge. She looked at me incredulously when I told her I had not yet seen it.

After glancing at her watch, she asked "Can you take notes while I drive?" Moments later we were hustling out the door to her vehicle.

The city of Merced is about four miles wide, so before long we were at the outskirts of the city. It was here that I found the most vivid images of the spectacular growth of this community. In between small patches of farmland, sprawling developments sat half-finished at intervals along both sides of the road, in preparation for the 95,000 new residents that are expected to populate Merced County by 2020.

As we got further from town, the developments subsided and the landscape was reclaimed by pristine farmland and rolling golden hills. An impressive cluster of modern buildings rising out of the bucolic landscape, the UC Merced campus was easily to pick out as we approached from the west. Barely one year old and not yet at full enrollment, the parking lots appeared empty as we crossed the campus, and only a few students and faculty could be seen strolling between the academic buildings and the residential area.

The fabric of Merced County has been forever altered by the arrival of this institution, hailed by many as a "world-class research university" that will attract new business and people into the area. The new campus is already a symbol of Merced's growth, and represents the unique opportunity—and daunting challenges—facing Constructing Connections as it works to ensure that the County's child care infrastructure keeps pace with increasing demand for services.

—Alex Hildebrand

A Brief Overview of Merced County

MERCED COUNTY GROWTH & ECONOMIC CHANGE

Like many parts of California, Merced County is experiencing growth in population and infrastructure. Unlike most other areas, Merced County is a predominantly rural area that is in a tremendous state of flux; its population growth exceeded that of the state as a whole by 7% between 1990 and 2002.³ By 2020, the County's population is projected to increase by 44% over what it was in 2002, which means an addition of 95,000 people, 17,000 of whom will be children under the age of five.⁴ Most of the population growth will be in the cities of Merced and Los Banos, which lies only 50 miles southwest of Merced.

The speed at which parts of the County are evolving from farmland to housing and commercial developments is straining the culture as well as the physical infrastructure. Gaye Riggs, Assistant Superintendent of the Early Care and Education (ECE) division at the Merced County Office of Education, describes Merced County as a “high-growth area with a strong old-guard base and political decision-makers and a lot of new folks.”

What has historically been a predominantly agriculture-based economy is shifting to a service economy, yet wages and education levels remain low compared to the rest of California. The arrival of the University of California Merced, first University of California (UC) campus in the San Joaquin Valley, will doubtlessly contribute to major educational, economic and demographic changes. The new UC campus was brought to the area in hope of expanding residents' access to higher education and expanding economic opportunities for the region's population. By 2035, UC Merced is expected to host 25,000 students, and there will be several distance learning sites built throughout the Valley, including one in the city of Modesto in neighboring Stanislaus County.

³ *Economic Impact of Child Care in Merced County*, 2003.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The campus has also brought economic activity to the areas, and this has already been felt. An early boon was a \$30 million fund established in 1999 by former Governor Gray Davis to acquire and preserve habitat in Merced County in anticipation of the construction of the campus. This helped leverage a \$2 million grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, as well as \$11 million from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. The Packard Foundation's intention for their grant—to “assist the University in enhancing access to the children of the San Joaquin Valley to the UC system” as well as to “foster responsible development and environmental stewardship”—mirrored the desire of many residents, businesses and government agencies to bring educational resources and economic opportunities to the region while protecting agricultural lands and open space.

Nearly 1,500 new jobs in construction, construction supply and the service industry accompanied the development of the campus. The State of California is now providing operating funds as well, with a budget of \$20 million in 2005 to help pay for UC Merced faculty and student support services as well as some continuing expenses for the new construction.

The presence of a high profile university in Merced County is bound to change the educational aspirations of young people and parents alike. It can also help focus attention on the relationship between early education and future health and productivity levels in the county. The University of California System and UC Merced are helping to establish this connection by conducting outreach to the student populations in the area. UC Merced administrators have already visited 144 high schools throughout the San Joaquin Valley and UC Merced currently sponsors online advanced placement courses for high school students. The University has also established professional development programs for the region's K-12 teachers.

NEW CULTURAL DYNAMICS

One cannot talk about change in Merced County without considering the region's rapidly expanding “tapestry of languages, cultures and ethnicities.”⁵ The recent *New York Times* bestseller *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, a book about a family caring for a child with special needs, illuminates the sometimes dire consequences of the culture and language gaps that exist between service providers in Merced and the substantial Hmong community that has relocated to the Central Valley. Furthermore, while the Hispanic population in the rest of California is predicted to outnumber the white population by 2025, this demographic watermark has already occurred in

⁵ *Executive Summary, Merced County Children's Action Plan.*

Merced County: in 2005, 45% of the County's population was Hispanic compared to only 40% that was white and non-Hispanic.⁶

The development and growth of UC Merced is likely to compound the cultural and economic transformation already underway in Merced County. New jobs, new industries and an influx of student, faculty, and staff from outside the area will accelerate the rate of change and present unfamiliar challenges and opportunities to a population that is already straining to adapt.

EARLY CARE & EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN MERCED COUNTY

The early care and education system in Merced County has a long history of innovation and collaboration aimed towards systems improvement. Woven into the story of the county's major developments in this field over the past two decades are the vision, dedication and skills of two individuals in particular, Lee Andersen and Gaye Riggs.

As Superintendent of Schools and head of the County Office of Education, Dr. Lee Andersen holds a critical position with respect to children's services in the entire county. His history in the field and in the region is deep; he has spent the last 28 years serving within the Merced County Office of Education.

In addition, Andersen brings experience in the politics of city planning to the child care infrastructure discussion. He was a Planning Commissioner for the City of Merced for nine years prior to becoming County Superintendent of Schools, and is well aware of the importance of land use planning in addressing the growing child care facilities crisis in Merced County.

Gaye Riggs has been committed to improving the educational infrastructure on behalf of Merced County's children for nearly 30 years. In 1989, in response to what she saw as an unacceptably difficult-to-navigate system of care for children with special needs, she began crafting the Merced County Interagency Children's Roundtable, which is a "one call referral" system that coordinates services for children ages 0-3 with special needs who require help from more than one agency. This early model set a standard for collaborative problem-solving around early childhood issues in Merced County. Riggs now serves as the Assistant Superintendent of the Early Care and Education (ECE) Department at the Merced County Office of Education (COE).

Lee Andersen's commitment to system improvement is evident in his work to bridge the gap between elementary school and early care and education. He helped convert the Merced County K-16 Council into a P-16 Education and

⁶ *Economic Impact of Child Care in Merced County*, 2003.

Community Council in 2003, a move that simultaneously integrated the often-neglected element of preschool into the educational continuum and widened the composition and focus of the Council to include economic development, higher education, facility development and even insurance.

This important and symbolic change was followed in 2004-05 by two other significant events which influenced the operation of early care and education programs in Merced County. The Merced County Board of Supervisors released its Head Start grant and MCOE prevailed in the Request for Applications (RFA) process to become the operator of this program serving 1060 children and families. About the same time, the non-profit entity that had been operating the child care subsidy programs filed bankruptcy and MCOE became the county's Alternative Payment Program operator. It was under Andersen's leadership that the County Office of Education took the risk to begin operating and stabilizing these two important programs.

As a result, these programs are now under the same umbrella as most of the rest of the county's early childhood services, including ACCESS Resource and Referral Agency, the county's source of child care provider training and child care referrals for families, the CARES program (Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Educational Standards), CPIN (California Preschool Instructional Network Region 7) and CEL (Centralized Eligibility List). Andersen grouped all this work within an entirely new department at the County Office of Education—the Department of Early Care and Education—and it instantly became its largest department.

“...quality child care contributes to school success...”

—Lee Andersen
Merced County
Superintendent of Schools

While to some this massive growth in program responsibility in such a short period of time might have seemed a questionable undertaking, it came naturally to the leadership of the County Office of Education. “If there was a time to do something, this was it,” stated Gaye Riggs. Lee Andersen reinforced the logic of the decision from his point of view: “As far as mission goes, quality child care contributes to school success, and Head Start will do a great job of interfacing with school districts that will be getting the kids. This wasn't happening before.”

While challenges remain in the process of incorporating these two massive programs into the COE infrastructure, it has been a highly successful transition. Andersen notes that, while there are obvious ongoing budgetary challenges associated with assembling a \$25 million department with multiple program types, both program quality and staff morale are high, partly because “there were gaps in communication and cooperation before [and] now those are gone.”

Cooperative problem-solving, whether eliminating barriers or creatively re-organizing resources, is driven by pragmatism in a relatively under-resourced area. “The thing about a rural area like ours that doesn't have a lot of

“The thing about a rural area like ours that doesn't have a lot of economic resources is that we end up working together a lot more.”

—Lee Andersen
Merced County
Superintendent of
Schools

economic resources is that we end up working together a lot more,” Andersen explained. Working together is a necessity, not an option.

The Merced County First 5 Commission has now joined the leadership cohort for early care and education. Established in Merced County as in all California counties in 2000, the Commission adds new resources and an important local political stage for addressing early childhood issues.

In addition to providing millions of dollars for community programs for children age five and under, the Commission tackled the issue of child care facilities early on, establishing a fund for and playing a crucial brokering role in facility development projects around the county. The Commission plays a significant role in the P-16 Council and has been a reliable and effective partner to the County Office of Education in many other endeavors.

The child care system in Merced County, like anywhere else in America, is highly decentralized. This is a strength in that there are a wide variety of providers and environments to choose from, but is a weakness to the extent that it makes systemic problems such as low child care supply difficult to address. The level of collaboration between major early care and education organizations in Merced County—exemplified by the consolidation of child care-related services within the Office of Education—gives the county an advantage in addressing this shortcoming.

The Context for Constructing Connections

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS ABOUT CHILD CARE

Merced County was party to a major reframing of child care that swept the entire nation over the last decade, a reframing that set the stage for Constructing Connections. While traditionally perceived as an amenity and sometimes as a social service, the image of child care has been transformed such that it is now seen to be a critical part of the education continuum and an important economic development consideration. This reframing has been fueled by two emergent areas of research, one concerning the importance of early brain development and another concerning the economic impact of child care.

Gaye Riggs noted with certainty the changes she has been seeing and experiencing recently in her field.

“I have learned that doing quality care is more than loving children. We have often misled students at the community college level by saying ‘Oh you love kids, you should be in child care!’ Loving kids is not enough, in fact it’s barely a start. The folks who are providing the best quality of care are also running their business better. They have better relationships with parents, they have contracts, they are clearer about what they will provide and how they collect money from their parents. So I began to see the link between the quality of care and how providers ran their businesses. I began to see this work a little differently. Coming out of education, you are thinking of the soft sides of it. But the failures in relationships, the failure of people to follow the rules—all of this comes around to the business side. It made sense to get smart about how we do this.”

She also reflected on the continuing need for public education about child care and school readiness:

“We are still proving how important child development is for school readiness but I think [public awareness] is different than it was five years ago—it is greatly improved. We have been doing a lot of talking about the research, like in the conversations about Prop 82. For example, Los Banos Unified School District asked me to come out and talk about quality early care and education and what the district could do to begin developing a preschool system in their district and in the community. They realized they could benefit from more information about kids under five years old and the services they use in the community. We had a very productive dialogue, and now they better understand the importance of early education. This conversation was not happening even two years ago.”

County Supervisor Jerry O’Banion can wax passionate about the importance of early intervention. A tour of a child care center 10 years ago at the County Human Services Agency shifted his understanding. “The federal building had been bombed (in Oklahoma) and the child care center here was working on efforts to send teddy bears to all the kids in the building there. They invited the supervisors over to see what they were doing. I saw that it was not just babysitting; the kids were really learning.”

As we plan for growth and as new freeways are being built, where’s child care in all of this? Where are we putting these kids when parents get on whatever forms of transportation they use to get to work?

—Christie Hendricks

Project Lead

Constructing Connections

The *Economic Impact of Child Care in Merced County* report, released in 2003, had a tremendous impact on the local conversations about child care. This economic impact report (EIR) demonstrated that licensed child care is a significant industry in its own right, generating \$63 million per year in gross receipts, and that this child care allowed some 1,285 Merced parents to participate in the workforce. The rapid growth of Merced County and the public deliberations about planning for the future doubtlessly reinforced the urgency of this message. Christie Hendricks, Coordinator of the Constructing Connections project in Merced County, feels that the EIR has engaged more residents in the issues. “The fact that we have an EIR is huge,” she asserts. “Now people are talking about the importance of child care, and it’s only going to become more obvious that we need child care if more parents are going to work.”

The new research and language about child care, and the higher profile of child care needs in the community, have been a boon for those trying to increase involvement and investment in the child care sector. However there is clearly a long way to go. “There aren’t as many businesses as you would think that support child care,” commented Lee Andersen. “I asked our Community Care Licensing representative, who covers all the way from San Joaquin to Kern County, to find out which businesses offer programs to

support child care, and she only came up with hospitals. I would have thought other businesses would be doing more.”

Because of this slow but steady sea change in how child care is viewed by the public as well as providers and advocates, Constructing Connections encountered a receptive audience when it arrived in Merced County.

AN ESTABLISHED NEED FOR FACILITY DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

The path for Constructing Connections had also been well paved by the Merced County First 5 Commission, which had multiple efforts already underway to expand the early care and education infrastructure.

For example, the First 5 Commission made a significant investment in the Power of Preschool (PoP) demonstration project, which was begun in 2005 with the dual purpose of making voluntary preschool available to all Merced County’s children and strengthening the link between the public education and child care systems. In bringing multiple elements of the early care and education system to the table, including school districts, Head Start and Migrant Head Start programs, and center- and home-based child care providers, the PoP demonstration project revealed the shortage of facilities appropriate for preschool programs.

As a funder, the First 5 Commission has had to grapple not only with this overall facility challenge but also with specific issues facing numerous independent facility development projects. (See sidebar on following page.) It took little time for the First 5 Commission to discover that it had limited capacity—both financial and technical—to address these facilities issues.

First 5 Commission Executive Director Pedro Paz acknowledged that the Commission’s ability to address the infrastructure piece is limited and he appreciates how Constructing Connections is “setting up the groundwork for these needs and looking at alternatives to funding.” Paz also notes that First 5’s facility development activities are institutionally specific to the Commission’s goals of improving the health and well-being of children ages five and under, while Constructing Connections provides an opportunity to allocate resources according to a more strategic county-wide needs assessment.

Thanks to all of this activity in the early care and education field and the major press coverage of the statewide *Preschool for All* initiative (Proposition 82) facing all California voters, “the community was hearing about early care and education an awful lot,” according to Christie Hendricks. This messaging, combined with the fact that Merced County was at a critical

point in its growth and development, made the timing ideal for assembling a broad array of stakeholders to address the child care facilities challenge.

It's More Than the Money

The First 5 Commission has a small grant program for the development of child care facilities. One of the funded projects was the construction of a center for a child care provider whose previous site had been deemed unsafe and subsequently condemned by the Health Department. When efforts to relocate the facility encountered serious resistance, the Commission had to take a position on the state of the structure.

Although the City of Los Banos valued the child care center and had invested city funds as well as Community Development Block Grant money in the relocation, the project ran into problems with the Planning Commission. Potential environmental toxins at the proposed site and traffic considerations stalled the development process.

County Supervisor Jerry O'Banion, who Chairs the Merced County First 5 Commission, said that while it was a challenge to put together the financing, the process of approving and developing the facility was much more taxing and almost led to the demise of the project. He noted that of all the facility projects the Commission has invested in, most are still in the planning or development stages. For this and other reasons, he and the full Commission welcomed Constructing Connections with open arms.

The Arrival of Constructing Connections

Given the operational integration of early care and education services in Merced County and the expansion of its scope of impact to include economic development and facility development, Constructing Connections was a natural fit, and indeed a vital resource, for the County Office of Education.

The opportunity for a Constructing Connections grant played into the County Office of Education's vision for a coordinated early childhood education system; the grant was a defining project for the P-16 Committee to help that group better understand and embrace child care. Lee Andersen noted, "There's a lot of overlap between P-16 and Constructing Connections. The more successful we are with the child care and preschool part, the more successful we'll be at the higher levels. For example, if we have good quality child care readily available, we will have more children ready to read."

Gaye Riggs agreed the grant opportunity would be a great fit for the COE. "So often those of us in child care think 'program' and forget about the infrastructure requirements," she said. "This grant would require us to develop [facility and financing] expertise that would take our work to the next level." The P-16 Council, whose membership included critical players from the First 5 Commission, agreed to take the project on.

Lee Andersen, Gaye Riggs and others at the COE crafted a proposal to the Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF) for a \$65,000 Constructing Connections grant to be housed and managed within COE by the ACCESS Resource and Referral Agency. The proposal was submitted on August 3, 2005, and the award letter was received on November 14, 2005.

ACCESS sees itself as the perfect home for the Constructing Connections project, primarily because it is the "go-to" agency for child care providers who need business, financial or facility assistance. Prior to Constructing Connections, ACCESS had already begun developing resources for increasing the business savvy of providers, partnering with the Merced County Department of Commerce, Aviation and Economic Development and

the Small Business Development Center to offer a business planning training series specifically designed for the child care field.

The Constructing Connections project was seen as an ideal vehicle for increasing ACCESS's capacity to give providers the tools they need to plan for and fund new or expanded facilities. ACCESS staff regularly heard from child care providers who wanted to open child care centers. According to ACCESS staff, "Historically we have sent them along to CCL (Community Care Licensing), and they haven't been able to help them with that."

Lee Andersen did not have to look far for a coordinator—Christie Hendricks, a speech language therapist, was already at ACCESS Resource and Referral Agency, having come to work there in 2004 as the Local Child Care and Development Planning Council Coordinator, the ELOA grant administrator, and the child care stipend manager. Upon being hired to coordinate the Constructing Connections project, Hendricks was immediately swept into an intense relationship with the Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF) as well as with the nine other Constructing Connections sites across the state. She began receiving phone calls from LIIF, attended an orientation meeting with the three other new Constructing Connections sites and then participated in a Constructing Connections Learning Community meeting—all before she had a chance to convene the Merced Collaborative.

Having recently managed a federal grant where "they hand you a binder and you never see them again," Hendricks was pleasantly surprised by the level of involvement of the LIIF Constructing Connections staff. The intensity of the relationship, while overwhelming in some regards, had its advantages. Hendricks was able to learn from the experience of other sites and engage her project coordinator at LIIF to help plan the initial Collaborative meeting, which by many accounts was very successful. (See ***Convening the Collaborative*** on the next page.)

Hendricks and other supporters of the fledgling Constructing Connections Collaborative recruited an impressive set of community leaders and child care advocates for the first Collaborative meeting. Participants gained not just an understanding of the project, but also a sense of how, through collective work, they could accomplish things unattainable to any one of their organizations. Gaye Riggs said that the gathering was a revelation to her of "how many different entities are involved in our work." Christie Hendricks was satisfied with the first meeting's results, but knowingly crossed her fingers for luck that this initial diversity and scale of the Collaborative would persist and build.

Convening the Collaborative: The Initial Meeting

For the first meeting of Merced’s Constructing Connections Collaborative on March 29, 2006, Christie Hendricks invited a team from LIIF to be present and hired a professional facilitator to lead the meeting. The meeting focused on building participants’ knowledge and understanding about the Collaborative, the issues it intended to address and the people in the Collaborative.

Participants introduced themselves, and then Maricela Carlos, the Constructing Connections Manager at LIIF, and local leader Gaye Riggs gave an orientation to the field of child care and to the project. Another Constructing Connections staffer from LIIF introduced a “20 step timeline for developing and financing a child care center,” establishing the framework for a small group activity. Participants divided into small groups to discuss one of three phases of the facility development process—planning, predevelopment or development. The groups shared their current work in child care facility development, and then identified the barriers to their development progress and suggested what could be done to better support the facility development process.

In concluding the meeting, Hendricks emphasized that a Collaborative would be instrumental to addressing the barriers and implementing the solutions that the small groups identified. She asked participants to volunteer or identify others to be members of the Collaborative. Sixteen agencies and about 25 individuals were identified to participate in a Collaborative meeting which was forecast to take place the following month.

Participant Reactions

The strength of the showing at this first meeting struck everyone, from new participants to longstanding players in the child care world. Mike Hiller, Vice President of Business Lending at County Bank in Merced, was intrigued because “there was such a wide scope of services in there. There were state and federally funded projects, so many different capacities that people were representing.”

Supervisor Jerry O’Banion thought the meeting demonstrated a community-wide interest in child care. “The group was good and broad—both government and private enterprise. Even the City and County Fire Department were there.” Lee Andersen reflected, “It’s rare to have representatives from the county and so many cities around the same table talking to each other [as in this meeting.]” Even Gaye Riggs, a long time developer of programs for young children, was surprised at the range of organizations attending the meeting. Many participants had been involved in one aspect or another of child care, but with a single “silo” perspective of their role vis-à-vis the whole system, “like the elephant and the blind men story,” Riggs noted. Having so many diverse players in the room made her realize how big the elephant really is.

Christie Hendricks was pleased that they accomplished the meeting objectives. “My main goal was to introduce the project to folks, because we were talking about child care with a group that hadn’t been at the same table to discuss the topic. We talked about supply and demand in Merced County, an overview of Constructing Connections, and I wanted the Collaborative to see how they or their organization fit into Constructing Connections and how they could support the goal of streamlining facility financing and development. I know that we did that. It was really good.”

Additionally, she acknowledged the political value of the diversity and scale of the first Collaborative meeting, and the incentives this provides to the Constructing Connections host, the P-16 Committee at the County Office of Education. “I think that P-16 sees how wide-reaching this project is, that the Collaborative is big and there are big players at the table. That is a powerful message.”

Building a Collaborative

A BASE OF SHARED VALUES

A resounding message from interviews with Constructing Connections Collaborative participants is that collaboration is a cultural norm in Merced County. This norm is attributed in part to the small size of Merced County. In ruminating on the value of multi-use facilities, Pedro Paz declared, “The community is too small not to think about these things—how to be creative in solving problems like that. The dollars are limited, so we have to think outside the box to overcome that.”

Others suggest that there is something unique in the culture of Merced County that frowns on self-interested behavior. Gaye Riggs reflected, “Our job is to advocate for all the children in this county. When we make decisions about resources, we make sure we do not only regard those who are most aggressive, or most out there for their particular school district or organization. We have done a good job about calling each other on imbalances of power and resources. That is an important community-based value.”

Pedro Paz attributes much of this to the influence of leadership. “How we work together in this community is a reflection of some of the great people we have,” he says. Whether this is intrinsic to Merced County or a product of effective leadership is difficult to determine, but in either case provides important context for the potential sustainability of the Constructing Connections Collaborative.

“The community is too small not to think about ...how to be creative in solving problems...The dollars are limited, so we have to think outside the box.”

—Pedro Paz

Merced County First 5
Commission

COMPETING FOR TIME & ATTENTION

Despite the predisposition towards collaboration, there is early evidence that Merced County faces challenges to securing and maintaining buy-in to the Constructing Connections working collaborative model.

Both Pedro Paz and Jerry O'Banion, members of the Collaborative, described the number of committees they are asked to participate on as overwhelming. They agreed that the current Constructing Connections schedule of quarterly meetings is the maximum they can commit to, and that they have to decline membership on committees that meet monthly due to their already packed schedules. This has clear implications for any ideas Constructing Connections has for sustaining the commitment of Collaborative members, especially those in senior level positions like Supervisor O'Banion and Paz.

Similar to Paz and O'Banion, Mike Hiller of County Bank commented on the demands of being involved in various volunteer roles. Present at the first Collaborative meeting, he was not able to attend the second. "I'm very involved in the community. I am an active member on an ample number of boards and committees. Sometimes I feel like all I do is go to meetings. I just dropped off one board because my increased responsibilities at work have squeezed my personal time which has forced me to be more selective with my commitments."

While impressed by the group of professionals that Constructing Connections had assembled for the first collaborative meeting, Hiller is concerned it will be an unwieldy group. "I just know when you get that many people involved, efficiencies tend to be impacted. It seems like [the individual members] have overlapping representation—do you need that many people?"

Hiller is also uncertain whether he needs to be at the Collaborative table right now, and downplays what he brings to the discussion in the early stages of the meetings. "Clearly there's a child care need in the County and the professionals involved with the Collaborative are much more in-tune with the issues at hand." He is waiting for the right time to contribute to the Collaborative, when he can draw from his area of expertise. "I am here clearly for the financing side—to provide a realistic perspective of what it will take to obtain a loan for a child care facility. I think we will find prospective operators who want to open a facility but they will be surprised by the down payment requirements or the amount of operating reserves needed to satisfy the lending requirements. Therefore, it is vital to educate the applicants about the available resources to enhance their financing applications."

Comments from these three community leaders highlight the value of well-run meetings, relevant roles, steady progress and a focused, energetic, positive group atmosphere. These Collaborative members ticked off a list of reasons why they left boards and organizations: meetings took forever; people fought about everything and there were turf battles everywhere; slow rates of progress, especially when government was involved; too many players involved to get anything done. All of these are examples of what the Constructing Connections Collaborative must avoid in order to engage busy community leaders.

THE VALUE-ADD OF THE ABCD MODEL

Several specific elements of the design of Constructing Connections have been of critical value to efforts in Merced County.

Christie Hendricks cites in particular the value of the collaborative model; she notes that, “It’s important that we have that diverse membership” so that collective solutions to problems can be generated, and ownership established for implementing those solutions.

Gaye Riggs suggests that Constructing Connections has been instrumental in helping the child care community increase their understanding of and commitment to the business side of child care. She remarks, “So often those of us in child care think program, and we forget about the infrastructure requirements. Constructing Connections is about helping the community get wiser about this.”

Riggs conjured the “elephant and the blind men” analogy to describe how, in the past, siloed views, expertise, and experiences of child care facility development have resulted in a limited capacity to create new child care spaces in response to the need. Now, Riggs believes that Constructing Connections is creating vital and needed connections between these historically disparate components of the child care facility development process.

Pedro Paz adds that the comprehensive nature of the Constructing Connections model is helping to ensure that the facility needs of all parts of the county are identified and addressed. He notes that the collaborative is helping to bridge a historical divide between the California State Route 99 corridor and the west side of the county, which includes Los Banos.

Hendricks, as a representative of the new Constructing Connections cohort, declares that the Learning Community has been an invaluable resource for rapidly advancing her understanding of the nature and challenges of building child care facilities. According to Hendricks, “the last Learning Community

meeting in San Francisco was an ‘a-ha’ moment. There was a presenter who talked about incorporating child care into cities as they develop instead of trying to infill later, and I said, ‘oh my god, that’s Merced, that’s what we have to do!’” She adds that “the other sites are really supportive, they share everything so you don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

In addition, the technical assistance provided by ABCD staff has helped Hendricks accelerate her ability to lead the collaborative. She notes that, due to her deep history in the field of education, Constructing Connections has presented her with the challenge of reaching out to new sectors, for which she has had to “step out of (her) comfort zone.” According to Hendricks, “ABCD’s model of being as supportive as they are helped me get there. They encouraged me by saying ‘take the step, and we’ll be there to assist you.’”

MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

Merced County Constructing Connections has made great strides in its first year of existence. It has completed the first two Year One target objectives outlined by LIIF for Constructing Connections sites—an assessment of the community’s child care facilities needs and an inventory of local barriers to child care facilities development—and is underway on the third, which is to develop a catalog of local resources that support facility financing and development. It has even created a facility pipeline ahead of schedule, with four projects in planning and one in development, which will surely grow quickly as the Collaborative gains momentum.

Constructing Connections leaders recognize that it will take different strategies to develop the Collaborative and maintain momentum over time as the initiative matures.

Gaye Riggs acknowledges that the project has had a high profile in the community and that the Collaborative cannot take this attention for granted. In future months, this will mean more one-on-one interactions to promote the Collaborative. “Even in a small town when you are calling on all your favors, it still takes a personal touch,” she emphasized. Interviewees hope that the Collaborative will increase its membership to include more representatives of the business community, as well as Merced College and UC Merced.

Christie Hendricks recognizes that, as the project lead, her vision for Constructing Connections is a critical factor in the Collaborative’s success. She is determined to develop this vision so that it is shared by others, and to bring the right people into the Collaborative. She is convinced that she must help people realize the critical need for anticipating child care infrastructure as the staggering growth of Merced County continues, rather than allowing it to be an afterthought, which is a key reason for the current shortage of care.

This message needs to be carried broadly and through personal contacts to business and economic development entities. Lee Andersen believes that, in order for Constructing Connections to gain traction, “We need to point out that improved child care options will make [cities’] economic development programs optimal. We have large companies asking about school and child care; it’s a priority for these businesses.”

Andersen also understands the importance of concrete accomplishments to sustaining a movement. He emphasizes how critical this is for the burgeoning movement that is Constructing Connections: “If we come through with a few projects that happen, that are housed and up and running, at a few locations around the county, it will be the start of something that could continue.” Andersen is also advocating for more trainer personnel to create a broader, stronger support team for child care facility development. “If there were a few informal teams of folks from the key entities—planning, licensing, and education—ready to support and provide information for applicants, that would be a good outcome, because the system is so complicated that it almost requires an advocate.”

Convening the Collaborative: The Second Meeting

The second Collaborative meeting had a decidedly different format from the initial meeting and two key changes were immediately visible: Christie Hendricks facilitated the meeting herself, and there were fewer attendees, some of whom had not attended the first meeting.

Despite the smaller turnout, there was still an impressive diversity of representation, including Child Care Licensing; a new community center named the Washington Carver project; the Merced Department of Commerce, Aviation and Economic Development; Merced County Department of Workforce Investment; the Merced County Dept of Forestry/Fire Protection; and longtime early care and education advocates such as the County Superintendent of Schools, the County Office of Education's Assistant Superintendent, the ACCESS Resource and Referral Agency supervisor and Merced County First 5 Executive Director Pedro Paz.

After a slide presentation on the objectives of the project and the purpose of the meeting, Hendricks helped people divide into two work groups. Each group focused on one of two Collaborative-sponsored activities, either Technical Assistance and Outreach or Catalog of Resources. There was initial confusion about the nature of the topics and how to determine which group was the more appropriate one for an individual to join. At this point, both Gaye Riggs and Manuel Fierro, LIIF Constructing Connections staff, stepped in to help resolve the matter. After engaging the larger group in a brief discussion, they solicited agreement to re-name the small groups "Outreach and Advocacy" and "Catalog and Technical Assistance." The conversation seemed to also help participants understand the tasks assigned to both small groups.

As the groups organized to begin their work, the Merced County Department of Forestry and Fire Protection representative approached Hendricks to explain that he had received an emergency call and would have to leave the meeting. Hendricks assured him he had an important role in the Collaborative, and promised to follow up with him after the meeting.

The work groups wrapped up their tasks, and it was evident that participants were gaining clarity about the specific ways that outreach, advocacy, technical assistance and a catalog would contribute to a healthier child care infrastructure. During the brief report from one small group, a participant reflected that his group's discussion about opportunities to collaborate with a hospital or UC Merced around facilities brought "a note of optimism and potential excitement" for the work ahead.

In her closing remarks, Hendricks thanked participants for "producing so much in a short period of time." She also reminded everyone that the two small groups would meet independently prior to the next Collaborative meeting. Riggs also reminded everyone in the room about potential Collaborative members and others who were not present. Although directed to Hendricks, Riggs' comment was really a call to action for the group: get out into the community, tell others about what happened in today's meeting and assure them that they will be welcomed and able to easily step into the work of the group at the next Collaborative meeting.

MORE CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

Merced County has a number of unique characteristics that may provide special challenges and opportunities for Constructing Connections as it grows and evolves. Three in particular are important to note: attitudes about women and family, cultural diversity and an absence of private philanthropy.

Interviewees characterized the prevailing view towards work and family as somewhat conservative and old-fashioned, particularly around the role of women in society. According to Gaye Riggs, Merced County is “still a community that often wishes moms could stay home with their kids.” On the other hand, businesses depend on mothers being available to work.

Language barriers and cultural clashes associated with Merced County’s growing diversity form another issue. The child care community is finding that different ethnic groups hold both different needs and different values around care for children. Many immigrant families, for example, have a difficult time understanding why they are required to be licensed if they are regularly caring for the children of friends of the family. These differences are exacerbated by the fact that few immigrants take part in community conversations about child care. Representatives of the Hispanic and Hmong communities have occasionally provided input or testimony at public meetings of the First 5 Commission, but their representation on the Commission and in the Constructing Connections Collaborative is minimal.

The child care community is searching for the best ways to design training and resources so that they are accessible to the full range of populations represented by the providers and the consumers of child care. ACCESS Resource and Referral has hired bilingual staff and interpreters in an effort to reach out to the Spanish-speaking population. According to Christie Hendricks, “We have a very strong professional Hispanic workforce in child care that is really interested in attending trainings and want to educate themselves.”

Finally, the scarcity of charitable dollars in Merced County is a barrier to garnering the level of resources that will be required to have a real impact on the gap between child care supply and demand. “There’s not much (philanthropic support) unless we have someone with time to generate this support,” comments Lee Andersen. “There’s a lot of untapped potential, and UC Merced has shown us that. There are a number of families and business owners here that haven’t been tapped like they would have if they were in a major metropolitan area.”

The Road Ahead

Despite the inevitable challenges ahead, key stakeholders in the success of Merced County Constructing Connections are convinced that the project has, in its short life span, already manifested important accomplishments. More importantly, there is a strong vision for what the project can achieve.

For example, Christie Hendricks is enthusiastic about the Collaborative's partnership with the Small Business Administration to offer trainings to child care providers to help them develop their business planning skills. She also conveys the importance of looking closely at the cultural issues around child care in the Hmong and Hispanic communities, specifically by engaging these communities in formalized conversations about how to extend assistance to them in a culturally appropriate way.

Hendricks also looks forward to advocating for the incorporation of child care into transportation planning "as we plan for growth and new freeways are being built." After learning through ABCD about how Bay Area child care representatives helped get child care centers co-located at BART stations, she is determined to ensure that planners and elected officials in Merced County are considering the needs of working parents when they set policy and make decisions about transportation resources.

The hopes of some Collaborative members are pinned on specific facility projects. For example, Gaye Riggs notes the importance of the Collaborative to child care center development projects that are particularly ambitious. Riggs notes, "We are thinking about a new center in Los Banos as one of the pipeline projects. The land and some of the basic infrastructure is being donated by the college, and the building is being built by the Special Education division of the County Office of Education. The operator is still being determined, but it will probably be a mosaic of Early Head Start, Migrant Head Start, and some others. There will be lots of things to think about in terms of licensing and structure of programs. The Collaborative will be an important factor because it is such a complex project."

Collaborative members also note the importance of establishing a permanent set of information and personnel resources for child care facility development and planning. “If there were a few informal teams of folks from the key entities—planning, licensing and education—ready to support and provide information for applicants, that would be a good outcome,” comments Lee Andersen. Members also hope the Collaborative will research specific barriers to facility development in Merced County and establish a resource library so that any child care provider could come to the County Office of Education and find the information they need to determine the viability of and a pathway for developing a child care facility.

Concluding Remarks

The urgent needs of the growing county are pushing the young Collaborative to move forward quickly. Will the Collaborative effectively extend the county's reach and resources? Will it create a new collective vision and collaborative ventures reflecting the interests of a new panorama of players?

Merced County, with the help of a Constructing Connections grant, is closer than ever to being able to effectively advance and support the development of child care facilities in a meaningful way. Leaders from the county's network of early care and education have established and launched the Collaborative from a firm base. Collaborative leaders are carefully listening to the perspectives of other stakeholders in child care infrastructure as they design their activities and broaden the Collaborative's membership.

The rapid advancement of the Constructing Connections Collaborative in Merced County also suggests that ABCD's prerogative to leverage the capacity of groups who are in a position of influence and leadership within the county is well-founded.

This case study also illustrates the wisdom of structuring the ABCD grant such that local matching funding is required; the commitment to the program by the Merced County Office of Education is doubtlessly strengthened by their financial investment, and they are in a stronger position to continue support for the program once ABCD funding is phased out.

The value of ABCD Technical Assistance and the Learning Community is also reflected in the experience of the Merced County Constructing Connections Collaborative; its leader, Christie Hendricks, has leaned heavily on both ABCD staff and the experience of other ABCD sites to accelerate the development of the Collaborative and hone in on strategies that will be particularly effective in overcoming barriers to child care facility development.

The ABCD component that has not played a significant role in Merced County's success with ABCD thus far is the Consultant Pool; this is likely because it was only initiated several months prior to the data collection for the

case study. However, Merced County Constructing Connections has stated its intent to use the Consultant Pool to help fill unmet needs such as Collaborative meeting facilitation, so the value of this resource may be realized in the near future.

Gaye Riggs declares, “I hope in the end we have an incredible vessel of information and expertise, and I hope if we build it, they will come.” Merced County Constructing Connections is off to an exciting, if slightly uncertain start. Given the quality and strength of leadership in the county and its history of working together, there is great promise for Constructing Connections in Merced County.

Appendix A: List of Interview Participants

- Dr. Lee Andersen
Merced County Superintendent of Schools
- Christie Hendricks
Project Lead for Merced County Constructing Connections.
- Mike Hiller
Regional Vice President / Business Banking Manager of County Bank
- Jerry O'Banion
Merced County Supervisor and
Chair of the Merced County First 5 Commission
- Pedro Paz
Executive Director, Merced County First 5 Commission
- Gaye Riggs
Assistant Superintendent, Early Care & Education Department, Merced
County Office of Education