



2023-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

Launched by the County of San Mateo, the San Mateo County Office of Education, and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation in 2012, The Big Lift is a bold collective impact effort that helps more San Mateo County students achieve reading proficiency by third grade. Its initial design drew on four evidence-based interventions recommended by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2010, which inspired the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading: high-quality preschool to boost kindergarten readiness, “inspiring summers” programs to prevent learning loss and maintain school year learning gains, attendance efforts to reduce persistent chronic absences, and family engagement to promote home literacy practices.

Since its inception, The Big Lift has worked to align and connect stakeholders around the collectively held priority of advancing third grade literacy with a focus on students who have the most barriers. It is a testament to both the power of the goal of third grade literacy – which is widely thought of as a proxy for setting young people up for future health and success – and the dedication of those carrying out the work, that the work goes on despite the challenges inherent in collaboration related to maintaining the attention and investment of a broad range of stakeholders needed to advance this important goal.

Several factors converge to make this the right time for The Big Lift to reimagine its next phase of leadership and implementation. In addition to five years of evidence and feedback identifying strengths and areas for improvement from its pilot phase, the larger early learning landscape has changed with historic new investments in early learning, most notably increased funding for the California State Preschool Program and the passage of universal transitional kindergarten (UTK). At the same time, the field as a whole is still recovering from the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant impacts on families, staffing, and the already fragile early childhood infrastructure. Finally, The Big Lift’s leadership and backbone structure has undergone significant changes in personnel and institutional representation, leaving questions about how decisions are made and who holds accountability for The Big Lift’s efforts and investments. For all of these reasons, this point in The Big Lift’s journey represents a critical opportunity to chart a path for the next three years.

This Strategic Plan presents a series of strategies and associated goals for evolving The Big Lift’s program model, governance, and organizational structure to position the initiative to have maximum impact on 3rd grade reading levels in San Mateo County. A wide range of The Big Lift stakeholders shared their perspectives as a part of this planning process as to how to accomplish these imperatives.



MISSION STRATEGIES

1

Develop and Operationalize an Equity Framework

Why now? The Big Lift's naming of inequitable outcomes as one of the reasons for its existence compels it to provide a clear explanation of how it works to advance equity. Further, a more clearly defined focal population would help The Big Lift identify and reach into the most effective spaces for reaching the children that need the most support.

2026 Goal

A documented Equity Framework provides clear guidance to The Big Lift as to how equity is addressed in its mission work as well as within the infrastructure of the initiative

2

Build a PreK-3 Focus on Literacy Instructional Quality and Alignment

Why now? The collective impact design of The Big Lift provides a unique opportunity to move more intentionally towards design and implementation of aligned literacy strategies and practices in educational settings as early as they are available to children. With increased state funding available for both public TK and state-subsidized preschool, there is a decreased need for resources directly supporting preschool. Furthermore, there is increased appetite from Big Lift districts for, and evidence supporting the impact of, curriculum and other supports to help teachers across grade levels deliver high quality literacy instruction, especially for those students with the greatest barriers.

2026 Goal

Targeted language and literacy instruction aligned with the science of reading reaches 75% of preschool-third grade classrooms in Big Lift districts

3

Ensure High Quality Summer Learning Experiences

Why now? To improve its contribution to third grade literacy outcomes, as well as to continue to provide quality summer experiences for The Big Lift focal populations, the Big Lift Inspiring Summers Program should focus on improving preparation of and support for instructors and increasing the quality of its summer learning curriculum. It is also important to ensure that literacy development is included as a desired program outcome and the corresponding interventions are built into the Big Lift Inspiring Summers Program.

2026 Goal

60% of eligible rising K-3rd graders in TBL districts are enrolled in the BLIS summer learning program

4

Build Focus on Family Engagement in Literacy Development

Why now? Given the lack of clarity reported by stakeholders about specific approaches to family engagement employed by The Big Lift to support literacy development, The Big Lift needs to articulate a clear approach to family engagement – informed directly by parent/caregiver input – that addresses attendance as a part of it.

2026 Goal

New family engagement approach, informed by parents/caregivers via Community Advisory Board, is ready for implementation



INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGIES

1

Clarify and Communicate Change Model

Why now? Stakeholders shared that lack of clarity about how The Big Lift works impedes buy-in and therefore limits the potential for impact, calling on The Big Lift to clarify its program model via a Theory of Change or some similar framework. Once clarity around the change model is established, The Big Lift should develop clear messaging about the why, how, and to what end of its work, that it then uses to foster collective understanding and support.

2026 Goal

75% of Big Lift stakeholders report they are "very clear" on The Big Lift's change model and that they "agree" or "strongly agree" that the model is likely to produce the outcomes named in it

2

Identify and Implement Updated Governance and Backbone Structure

Why now? Stakeholders shared that there is a lack of clear authority and accountability for The Big Lift, that backbone supports have been too inconsistent, and they would like more transparency regarding how decisions are made. Recent shifts in structures due to changes in personnel and institutional roles have made supporting and coordinating the work of The Big Lift even more challenging. To effectively enlist the participation of all actors who have something to offer to advance third grade literacy, The Big Lift needs to clarify its governance model with a focus on structure and decision-making, and determine what backbone model will be put in place to ensure capacity to support implementation.

2026 Goal

New governing body is up and running with a clear structure (including sub-entities), decision-making model, and backbone infrastructure

3

Refocus and Strengthen Support for Implementation Collaboratives

Why now? The strategic planning process clarified that Local Coordination collaboratives (organized by participating School Districts) and Shared Learning collaboratives (grouped by the Pillars) will help to ensure effective implementation. While there are implementation collaborative bodies of both of these types in place, stakeholders shared that lack of clarity about the purpose and function of these bodies is limiting their potential value and impact. Increasing clarity about and support for these implementation collaboratives can help The Big Lift unlock significant potential to accomplish their respective objectives: supporting the achievement of The Big Lift goals across the Pillars, and Pillar activities across The Big Lift geographies.

2026 Goal

90% of Implementation Collaborative members report that their participation is "valuable" or "very valuable"

4

Determine Future Funding Model

Why now? Because The Big Lift's future scope of work (what and how much it decides to take on) and governance model (which entities should have decision authority) are highly dependent on the amount and sustainability of revenue it secures, determining the future funding model is critical to informing important decisions about how the initiative is structured and led. The future funding model should take into account increases in state and federal funding for preschool, out of school time, and implications for local investments and funding strategies.

2026 Goal

Three-year Revenue Plan in place with staffing and infrastructure needed to implement it