

Kent County's Early Childhood System: A Community Plan

Executive Summary

Long before children knock on the kindergarten door, they will have learned more than during any other five year period. They will have learned how to think, how to solve problems, how to cope with stress, how to be creative and how to communicate. And it is our responsibility to make sure parents are able to provide the opportunities their children need to reach their full potential. Without opportunities, many children will lack basic skills and will enter kindergarten unprepared for school challenges. No common structure currently exists to serve all children before their fifth birthday, yet this is the most vulnerable period for any individual. Every early experience frames a child's social, psychological and intellectual development. Waiting until kindergarten is simply too late. This document serves as Kent County's community plan – the common structure – that will ensure all children have the foundation and the opportunities to reach their potential and to succeed in school and life.

Early childhood programs are, by design, focused on the child and the family, yet they impact the community in multiple ways.

From a **human perspective**:

- Positive childhood experiences between birth and age 5 enhance the child's development and potential for future success.
- Children involved in early childhood programs have better health and there is less strain on hospitals and public health systems.
- Full-day child care costs as much as college tuition at public universities. Approximately, one out of four Kent County families, however, earns less than \$25,000 a year.

From a **community perspective**:

- When children enter school ready to learn, schools are more successful which benefits all students and the community.
- Early childhood success can lead to higher graduation rates, lower crime rates, and reduced need for emergency services. This means less financial demand on the publicly funded services.
- Parents of children in quality early childhood programs are more likely to maintain steady employment, contribute to the community and become productive workers.

From an **economic development perspective**:

- For every \$1 invested in early childhood programs, there is a return of up to \$7 in savings due to higher school achievement; reduced need for special education services; higher graduation rates; and decreased contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems (source: High/Scope Perry Preschool Project)
- For every \$1 spent on childhood immunization programs, \$10 is saved in later medical costs (source: Ounce of Prevention Fund)
- Every state dollar invested in early childhood programs leverages \$3 in federal funds and each new federal dollar generates almost \$2 in economic activity (source: Mid-America Regional Council)
- The internal rate of return from early childhood programs exceeds the amount invested (source: Minnesota Federal Bank)

Kent County, Michigan has a strong history of advocating for children and their families. Beginning in 1990, the Citizens League of Greater Grand Rapids presented a community call to action within a document entitled, *When the Bough Breaks...Kent County's Child Care Crisis*. In 1991, *Perspective 21!* was initiated and was ground-breaking in its collaborative approach to identifying and implementing solutions for preventing child abuse and neglect. *Our Children, Our Future* was released in the mid-90's and provided a set of standards for minimal care at birth, after birth and throughout the child and adolescent years. In 1996, the *Joining Forces* initiative began as a state-level process for improving child care. And *Next Steps* was released in 2000; this document examined the link among resources, service providers and service recipients.

In the spring of 2000, the Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative officially began its work under the agenda to bring necessary change within both the school system and the broader community to guarantee high quality learning options for children in Grand Rapids. This initiative has identified early childhood education as an area that is essential to the success of local schools and our community.

And beginning in 2001, the Kent County Family & Children's Coordinating Council developed a subcommittee structure that allowed one of the subcommittees -the Early Childhood Committee- to begin developing a system for young children and their parents in Kent County.

When the Early Childhood Committee learned about the US Department of Health & Human Services' Early Learning Opportunities Act grants, there was recognition that the funding could serve as the impetus to focus work on the goal of creating a plan for an early childhood system. Kent County was awarded the grant in October 2002. The grant included funding to enhance early childhood service capacity in identified areas and to create a plan for an early childhood system. Beginning in January 2003, groups were convened to identify and define various aspects and components of the early childhood system. This document represents the work of those groups.

Conceptual Framework

The vision, goal and key assumptions comprise the conceptual framework for the Kent County Early Childhood System.

Vision

The guiding vision for the system is **a coordinated, integrated system of services that are voluntary, accessible, culturally competent, and universal and that have broad community and legislative support for all families.**

Goal

The primary goal for the Kent County Early Childhood System is that every young child in Kent County will be ready to succeed in school and in life. A child who is ready to succeed is:

- Socially, emotionally and physically healthy
- Able to communicate needs, wants, and thoughts
- Enthusiastic and curious in approaching new activities
- Able to do problem solving and use acquired knowledge
- Grounded in safe, stable, consistent and nurturing relationships.

Assumptions

The community plan for Kent County's Early Childhood System is based on several key assumptions.

- Parents are primary. Parents are the first environment for children and the family is the most consistent, long-term and influential source for children's learning and development. The word "parents" is used for all adults having responsibility for children and includes legal guardians, grandparents, fictive kin and others.
- Informal and formal support systems: Family circumstances impact parents' choices about involving various types and structures of informal and formal supports in their lives and the lives of their children.
- Universal access: All families will be able to voluntarily access a continuum of core services.
- Quality: High quality services are critical to successfully meeting the goals of the early childhood system.
- Relationship Building: Cooperation, coordination, and collaboration among parents, informal supports, core components of the early childhood system, other early childhood services and other education, health, and human service systems.
- Information: The early childhood system will create a community that provides parents, community members and policy makers with the information they need to make informed decisions in their roles related to early childhood.

Implementation

In order to achieve its vision and goal, the Kent County Early Childhood System must encompass four core service areas. The community plan describes these service areas, provides recommendations for each area, and identifies strategic goals as well as a governance structure and next steps.

Core Service Areas

Four core service areas are considered basic to and essential for ensuring the health development of every young child in Kent County. These areas are:

- **early childhood care and education,**
- **family health,**
- **family support, and**
- **parent education and skill building.**

Recommendations

The Early Childhood Committee developed many specific recommendations for each of the four core service areas. There are, however, two primary themes that cross the four areas: 1) the need for increased data collection and monitoring; and 2) the need for greater quality assurance through professional development, implementation of standards, and promotion of accreditation.

Strategic Goals

The Early Childhood Committee identified the following strategic goals, to be achieved by 2010:

- At least 85% of Kent County children will be ready for school
- At least 35% of Kent County's early care and education programs will be nationally accredited
- At least 50% of Kent County early care and education teachers will have a CDA or higher degree in early education and at least 50% of Kent County parent educators and family support workers will meet certification requirements

- At least 85% of Kent County pregnant women will receive adequate prenatal care and 50% of Kent County children birth through age 5 will receive comprehensive health services in accordance with a standardized periodicity schedule
- At least 25% of Kent County families will have access to parent education and family support programs that are responsive to their needs
- All sources of funding for Kent County early childhood programs will increase by 20%

For some of these goals, baselines exist; e.g. in 2004, less than 10% of the county’s early care and education programs were nationally accredited; in 2003, 14% of the Grand Rapids Public School kindergarten class was assessed as “school ready”; and in 2002, 70% of women had adequate prenatal care. For other goals, baselines are to be determined.

Governance Structure

	Composition	Responsibilities
Children’s Commission	Community leaders from funder, government, business, consumer and opinion leader groups	-Developing a strategic plan; monitoring progress -Adopting standards -Identifying outcomes; collecting and disseminating data on indicators -Prioritizing, planning, and implementing strategies for increasing capacity and funding
Children’s Partners	Providers, educators, advocates, and others serving children in the Kent County area	-Annual renewal of vision -Developing consensus on proposals for improving service -Preparing position papers/recommendations on standards, delivery, and coordination of services for review and adoption by the Children’s Commission
Children’s Subcommittees	Standing committees, Ad Hoc committee assignments by the Children’s Commission	-Community Awareness/Advocacy Committee will ensure community & legislative support -System Integration Committee will coordinate cross-component activities & information flow

Connections for Children was made possible by grant #90L00050/01 from the Child Care Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Total project costs include federal funding in the amount of \$878,820 (85%) and non-federal funding in the amount of \$155,086 (15%). The contents of this report are solely the responsibility of the Early Childhood Committee of the Kent County Family & Children’s Coordinating Council; Grand Rapids, Michigan and do not represent the official views of the funding agency, nor does the publication in any way constitute an endorsement by the funding agency.

Early Childhood System
c/o 118 Commerce Avenue SW, Suite 100
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
Phone 616.752.8634
Fax 616.459.8460