

## The History of Kent County's Early Childhood System

The Kent County community has a strong history of collaboration and innovation to support children and their families. Over the last two decades, considerable time and resources have been invested in identifying the needs of young children in Kent County and working to develop a comprehensive and coordinated system of support services to meet those needs. A commitment to continuity has guided the process; today's work is building on and refining earlier work and follows the direction previously set by the community.

A series of documents released in the 1990's focused attention on Kent County's youngest children. Beginning in 1990, the Citizens League of Greater Grand Rapids presented a community call to action with a document entitled *When the Bough Breaks...Kent County's Child Care Crisis*. In 1991, *Perspective 21!* was initiated and was groundbreaking in its collaborative approach to identifying and implementing solutions for preventing child abuse and neglect. *Our Children, Our Future* was released in the mid-1990's and provided a set of standards for minimal care at birth, after birth and throughout the child and adolescent years. In 2000, *Next Steps* was released examining the link among resources, service providers and service recipients.

By 2000, there was a growing understanding in the community of the importance of quality early childhood services. The Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative began its work in the spring of that year and identified early childhood education as one of two key priorities critical to the success of local schools and the community as a whole. At the state level, Michigan Ready to Succeed, an initiative for a universal and high-quality early childhood care and education system, was getting underway. That effort included dialogues in local communities. The Kent County Children Ready to Succeed Summit was held in September 2000 and included a review of the current early care and education system in the County and the development of an action agenda to close the gap between the current reality and a high-quality, universal system.

Around the same time, the Kent County Board of Commissioners made a long-term commitment to improve the well-being of children and families through the establishment of the Kent County Prevention Initiative. The areas of focus include family support services, early intervention for children at risk of abuse or neglect, and substance abuse services. The County invests approximately \$2 million annually in the Prevention Initiative and was the first county in the state to commit general fund resources to services for children and families.

The Kent County Family & Children's Coordinating Council adopted a subcommittee structure that included the Early Childhood Committee, which was charged with developing a system for young children and their parents. The funding to begin that work was provided by an October 2002 Early Learning Opportunities Act grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Beginning in January 2003, groups were convened to identify and define various components of the early childhood system, including a governance structure.

Two community forums to discuss governance of the early childhood system were held in 2004. At the first, Anne Mitchell, president of Early Childhood Policy Research, presented several models for consideration. Consensus emerged that the Kansas City model was most attractive. Consequently, a second forum was held in which Abby Thorman of the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation presented a detailed overview of the early childhood governance structure in her community, introducing Kent County to the concept of "Power Sneezers." Review and analysis of the Kansas City model ultimately led to the call for the Early Childhood Children's Commission in Kent County.

*Kent County's Early Childhood System: A Community Plan*, also known as the *Connections for Children Community Plan*, was released in September 2004 and was the result of the work begun after the receipt of the Early Learning Opportunities Act. In addition to outlining the proposed governance structure, it also identified four core service areas, listed several strategic goals and recommended increased evaluation and greater quality assurance.

The Early Childhood Committee, which had become known as the Children's Partners, approved the creation of the Early Childhood Children's Commission, as did the full Kent County Family and Children's Coordinating Council. Heart of West Michigan United Way also signed off on it and agreed to continue serving as fiduciary for the early childhood systems development work, a role it had held since 2002.

In early 2005, an executive director of the Commission was hired, and Commission members were selected, with Doug DeVos and Kate Pew Wolters agreeing to serve as co-chairs. That spring, Memorandums of Understanding were signed between the Commission co-chairs and the Kent County Family and Children's Coordinating Council and between the Commission co-chairs and the Heart of West Michigan United Way.

The first Commission meeting was held in August 2005, beginning a 2-year process of education regarding early childhood development, the needs of young children and families in Kent County and the correlation between quality early childhood services and community prosperity.

While Kent County was working to develop an early childhood system, the issue was also gaining traction at the state level. In 2005, Governor Jennifer Granholm proposed an early childhood initiative known as Great Start, which led to the creation of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation. The following year, the ECIC awarded our community a grant to begin the Great Start Collaborative of Kent County and the Great Start Parent Coalition. Children's Partners became the Great Start Collaborative, and the membership grew to include parents and other community representatives as required by the ECIC.

Around this same time, intense work was getting underway to advance the ideas laid out in the *Connections for Children Community Plan*. Five committees (Infant-Toddler Care and Education, Home Visiting, Family Health, Communications and Infrastructure) comprised of members of the Collaborative and Commission as well as other community members began development of the first phase of the early childhood system. Their work was presented in *Making Strides: Kent County's Early Childhood System*, which was released in October 2007 and provides the basis for demonstration projects that are now getting underway.

The work to develop Kent County's early childhood system became much more public in July 2008 with the community announcement of First Steps, defined as a "partnership of parents, community agencies, business leaders, healthcare providers, educators, foundations, faith leaders and individuals who are investing in our youngest children to ensure a better future for all." Later that year, a small committee was formed to look at a sustainable governance structure for First Steps and the Early Childhood Children's Commission. The Committee emphasized the need for independence and neutrality and recommended the Commission (First Steps) form a new non-profit organization. That recommendation was based on the community's earlier work, and the report issued by the group stated, "It is the opinion of the Committee that the decision to have an independent entity had already been made during the process that led up to the creation of the Commission, and it should stay that way."

The process to form an independent 510(C)(3) organization was completed in 2009, and the Early Childhood Children's Commission is now known as the First Steps Commission. Memorandums of understanding were developed between First Steps, the Great Start Collaborative, the Kent County Family & Children's Coordinating Council, and the Kent Intermediate School District. The system will continue to evolve and be refined, but the process that started nearly two decades ago is now moving from research and planning to implementation.