



**First  
Steps  
Kent**

# 2019 2020

**IMPACT  
REPORT**

# CONTENTS

PAGE 3

Letter from the President

PAGE 4

Tracking School Readiness

PAGE 6

COVID-19

PAGE 10

Ready by Five

PAGE 18

Equity

PAGE 20

Finance

PAGE 22

Thank You

Our community vision is that every young child in Kent County will enter kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed in school and life.



### First Steps Kent Team

Annemarie T. Valdez  
President

Heather Boswell  
Vice President

Tyler Aman  
Data & Outcomes Analyst

Cati Cortes  
Financial Accountant

Shelby French  
Finance & HR Coordinator

Jill B. Salisbury  
Fund Development &  
Project Coordinator

Kristen Sobolewski  
Shared Services Project  
Manager

Megan Streng  
Communications Manager

Christine Timbol Larson  
Ready by Five Early Childhood  
Millage Funding Administrator

Daniel VanderMolen  
Project Coordinator

# DREAM

Dear friends,

The last year has been full of challenges we had not imagined, and for far too many, heartbreak and loss. But it also has been a year of opportunity. An opportunity to see things in a different light and from a different perspective. An opportunity to confront the racial injustices that have been a part of our systems for hundreds of years. An opportunity to celebrate the strength and resilience of families. An opportunity to recognize the dedication and innovation of providers who serve and support young children. An opportunity to say “thank you” to the people of Kent County who recognize by investing in babies and toddlers we are investing in our future.



More than twenty years ago, visionary leaders got together to dream up a system of supports so that children enter kindergarten ready for success in school and life. We’ve made great strides since then and took a big leap forward in November 2018 when Kent County voters approved the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage. Over the last two years, First Steps Kent has worked with our partners to make sure families have access to services that help their children be healthy, on track, and ready to learn. The dream is becoming a reality.

As we move forward, we are focused intentionally on eliminating disparities for Black and Latinx children and those living in economically disadvantaged households and under-resourced communities. These disparities were exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis and brought to light when the nation’s attention turned to fighting systemic racism and injustice.

We are grateful for our many partners and supporters who do this work each day. Thank you for your commitment to our children, our community, and the opportunities that lie ahead.

Annemarie T. Valdez,  
President  
First Steps Kent



# SCHOOL READINESS

Within Kent County, the usage of data will foster an early childhood network that learns from and makes data-informed decisions. First Steps Kent's collective work ultimately seeks to impact three key indicators to ensure every child in Kent County is healthy and ready for kindergarten. These contributing indicators will provide additional depth, vision, and alignment with initiatives occurring in Michigan and across the county.



## CHILDREN ARE BORN HEALTHY

The weight of a baby at birth is a significant predictor of a child's health. Low birthweight is defined as a baby weighing less than five-and-a-half pounds. Newborns weighing less than that can be at increased risk of poor developmental and health outcomes through life.<sup>1</sup>

In 2018, 680 out of 8,613 babies born in Kent County had a low birthweight. That was 7.9 percent of all births. There are significant disparities among race and ethnicity within this number.<sup>2</sup> Read about the work we're doing to promote equitable healthy births on page 19.

## CHILDREN ARE HEALTHY AND DEVELOPMENTALLY ON TRACK

Early detection of developmental concerns can have long term impact on a child's later educational success. In the State of Michigan, 31 percent of children between the ages of nine months through 35 months receive a developmental screening (2017-2018). Research indicates that when parents express one or more concerns, their child's risk for disabilities is eight times greater than for parents who have no concerns.<sup>3</sup> Read more about how we are supporting community efforts in this area on pages 12-17.

## CHILDREN HAVE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Research shows that when a child is in an environment that supports development through stimulating activities and has a positive relationship with a responsive caregiver, the benefits are maintained even after the child has left the program or provider's care.

Out of 724 licensed childcare providers in Kent County, 299 have obtained a three-star-rating or higher (2019). Read about our child care work on page 6.

<sup>1</sup> Child Trends DataBank  
<sup>2</sup> KConnect Dashboard  
<sup>3</sup> <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/9814-children-ages-9-months-to-35-months-who-received-a-developmental-screening?loc=24&loct=2#detailed/2/24/false/1648,1603/any/19102,19103>



# OUR COVID-19 RESPONSE



Families' lives changed overnight when the COVID-19 crisis brought Michigan to a halt back in March. Suddenly, schools and preschools were closed. Many parents started working from home. Longstanding disparities were fully exposed. First Steps Kent and our partners reacted quickly, reimagining how we work, reimagining how we could help meet the needs of families across our community.

## MAKING AN IMPACT

- 3,039 children served
- 179 child care providers supported
- 19,717 items distributed (including 2,100 bottles of hand sanitizer, 1,600 masks, and 138 thermometers)
- The team includes representatives from First Steps Kent, KConnect, Great Start to Quality Kent Resource Center, Kent ISD, Great Start Collaborative, Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, Head Start for Kent County, Refugee Education Center, Bethany Christian Services, Hands Connected, Kent County Health Department, Talent 2025, Camp Fire West Michigan 4C, Grand Rapids Community College, LARA, one child care center director, three child care home business owners



## STEPPING UP FOR CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

When factories, offices, restaurants, and other businesses closed their doors back in March, it immediately upended the child care industry. Many families no longer needed outside care, while essential workers were desperate to find it for their kids who were suddenly not in school. Recognizing the abrupt changes for both providers and parents, First Steps Kent convened the Kent Child Care Crisis Response Team.

The first priority was to determine which child care centers and in-home providers were staying open and how many kids each could accept. The Kent Child Care Crisis Response Team helped refer families through a central intake process coordinated through Kent ISD. The team was able to connect 216 children to 117 child care providers during the critical months March - June.

Getting providers the supplies they needed was the next big challenge, as basic necessities were difficult to find on store shelves. First Steps Kent received a grant from the Coronavirus Response Fund at Heart of West Michigan United Way to support the purchase and distribution of supplies for licensed child care providers. The team distributed things like toilet paper,



hand sanitizer, paper towels, and thermometers, but also food for the children in their care.

Beyond meeting immediate needs, the team has been working proactively to support the industry long term, helping providers secure grants available to small businesses and advocating for policies that will help them survive this crisis and reopen safely. In September, Kent County awarded First Steps Kent \$450,000 in federal CARES Act funding that is being distributed in the form of easy-to-clean toys, curriculum, and technical assistance to local licensed providers to help them meet new health and safety requirements.

"The loss of income and concern about the future is weighing heavily on the industry now more than ever," said Kristen Sobolewski, Shared Services Alliance Project Manager at First Steps Kent. "Child care providers are always essential, whether we are in crisis or not. In the past ten years, we've already experienced child care providers close their business at a rapid rate due to inequities in the child care system. We are working collaboratively to ensure our community has this essential service now and well into the future."



# OUR COVID-19 RESPONSE

Services funded by the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage were just ramping up when the COVID-19 crisis hit Michigan. The statewide “Stay Home, Stay Safe” executive order came less than two months after 16 community-based organizations were awarded \$7.6 million in millage funding to provide new or expanded services to families with young children.

The pandemic created significant challenges but also gave organizations the chance to show their creativity and resilience.

Home visiting services that typically occur with someone sitting in a family's living room turned virtual, with video conferences, phone calls, and text messages. Parent educators still promoted early learning as they played with toddlers, moms, and dads. Nurses still provided critical information and support about babies' health and development. Social workers still helped parents and children develop strong bonds and provided emotional support to

moms dealing with postpartum depression. Trained volunteers still checked in on families to ask what kind of help they needed.

“I'm grateful you guys are doing this in this crazy time,” said one MomsBloom client. “Having an understanding ear is so helpful. The best part is seeing a face outside my family and having an opportunity to process.”

MomsBloom, a Ready by Five service provider that offers in-home support to families of newborns, started a group that connects parents via technology. This program may continue even after the COVID-19 crisis has ended.

The pain of the pandemic has not been shared evenly across communities. Families of color and those who are economically disadvantaged have been hardest hit. Health Net of West Michigan, which provides outreach and navigation services funded by Ready by Five, saw an immediate and lasting change in the type of support families needed.

## A TIME TO LISTEN TO PARENTS AND PARTNERS

“*In the early months of the COVID-19 crisis, we helped families with urgent needs like accessing food and rent assistance and filing for unemployment. Those needs have not gone away and have been compounded by the continued uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the fight for racial justice. We continue to walk alongside our clients to meet immediate needs and address long-standing disparities.*”

- Maureen Kirkwood, Health Net of West Michigan Executive Director.

“*It is as important as it has always been that children are healthy, developmentally on track, and ready to learn. We are grateful to our partners at Kent County and all the organizations that receive Ready by Five funds for their commitment to supporting our community's youngest children during this unprecedented and difficult time.*”

- Heather Boswell, Vice President, First Steps Kent

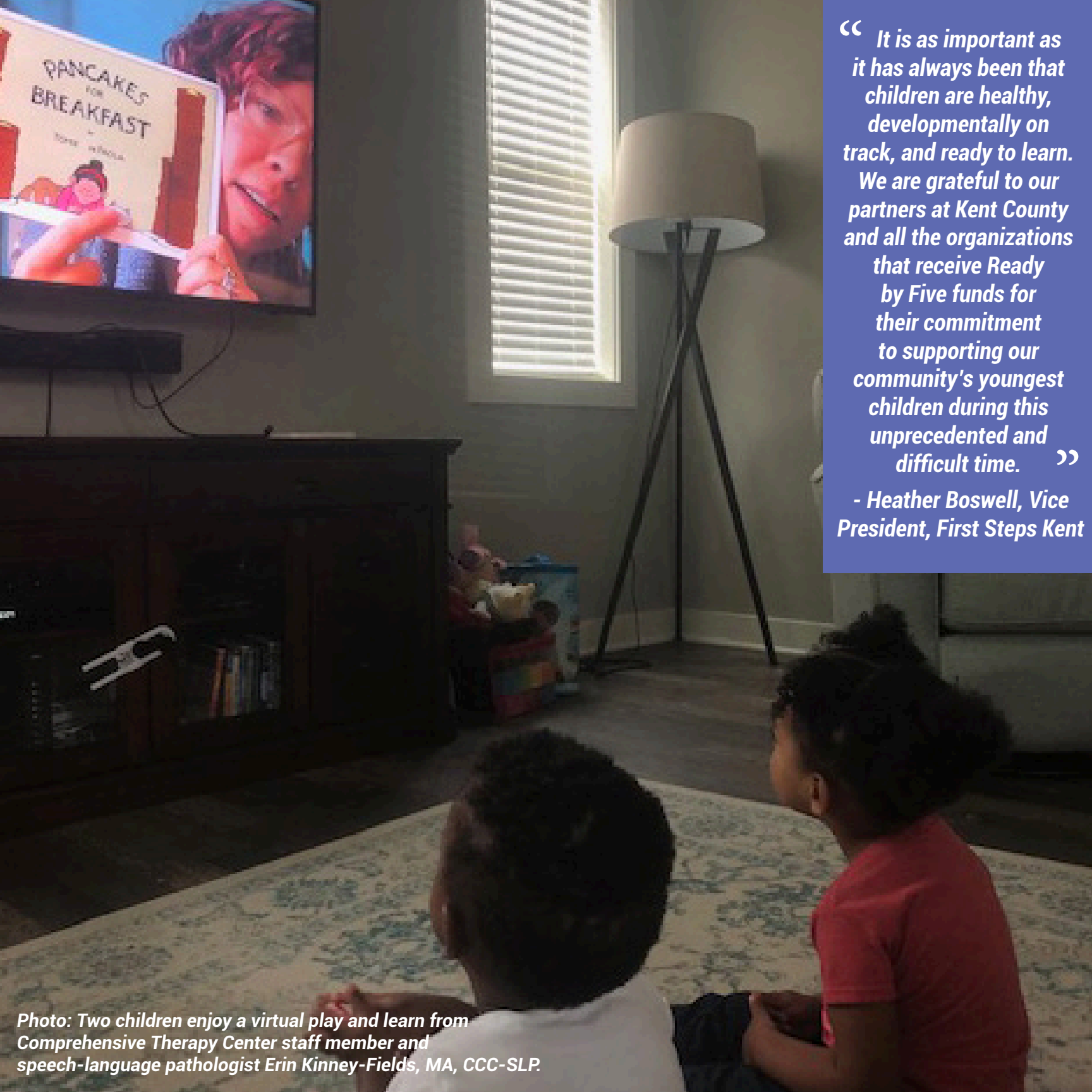


Photo: Two children enjoy a virtual play and learn from Comprehensive Therapy Center staff member and speech-language pathologist Erin Kinney-Fields, MA, CCC-SLP.



# READY BY FIVE

## EARLY CHILDHOOD MILLAGE WORK

Young children across Kent County are getting the support they need to be healthy, developmentally on track, and prepared for kindergarten thanks to the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage. The millage, approved by voters in November 2018, provides dedicated funding of approximately \$5.7 million a year, for six years, for community-based early childhood services. The Kent County Board of Commissioners selected First Steps Kent to administer and oversee the millage. A group of Kent County residents -- including parents, county commissioners and staff, a First Steps Kent trustee, and an early childhood professional -- reviews proposals from community organizations and recommends funding allocations.

Ready by Five:

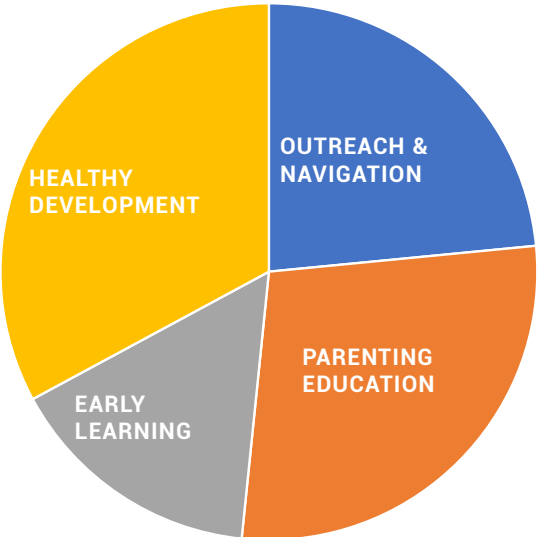
- Supports new parents so they can ensure their children are healthy and ready for school;
- Increases access to high-quality early learning experiences that build a strong social, emotional, and intellectual foundation; and
- Supports early identification of speech and hearing impairments, autism, or delays and disabilities so kids get the treatment they need.

“

*It is exciting to see more and more of the Ready by Five millage vision become reality. Kent County voters supported an early childhood millage with the idea of ensuring all of our community's children are ready for kindergarten. Rolling out these services makes that goal more real and tangible.*

”

- Kent County  
Administrator  
Wayman Britt



THE READY BY FIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD MILLAGE HAS ALLOCATED MORE THAN **\$10 MILLION** TO **17 ORGANIZATIONS** THROUGH **27 PROGRAMS**.

IN 2019, **\$2.4 MILLION** WAS ALLOCATED TO OUTREACH AND NAVIGATION SERVICES.

IN 2020, **\$2.9 MILLION** WENT TO PARENTING EDUCATION THROUGH HOME VISITING PROGRAMS, **\$1.6 MILLION** WENT TOWARD **EARLY LEARNING** PROGRAMS IN THE FORM OF PLAY AND LEARN COMMUNITIES, AND **\$3.4 MILLION** WENT TOWARD CHILDREN'S **HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT** THROUGH HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES.





How do I find quality child care? When should my baby start talking? I need healthy food for my children. These are common questions and concerns for families, and now there is an easier way to get answers and help.

The first round of Ready by Five funding was solely dedicated to Outreach and Navigation services. Four organizations are set to receive a total of \$2.4 million through 2021: Family Futures, Family Promise of Grand Rapids, Health Net of West Michigan, and Kent ISD. They work together to ensure that families know what services and resources are available

and how to access the ones that best meet their needs.

Each of the four organizations has a team of navigators who connect expectant parents and parents of young children with information about early childhood development and support services in the community. There is a "no wrong door" approach. No matter where or how families get connected, they will be matched with the resources they need and want. Outreach and Navigation services are available to families across Kent County, with a strategic focus on those facing the greatest challenges.

Paula was a new mother. She was referred to Health Net of West Michigan and assigned to social worker Katie. Paula felt that her anxiety might be impacting her bond with her one-month-old and had reached out about her concerns. Paula was assured that the feelings she was having were normal.

During a phone call, Katie got a chance to listen to the way that Paula talked and cared for her baby. Paula was able to talk through how she felt. Katie assured Paula that the way she was talking in a calm and caring voice was a great way to connect. Paula began to feel better over the course of the call and felt empowered to continue approaching small moments with a calm outlook.

Together, Katie and Paula completed an early childhood questionnaire and it showed that Infant and Toddler Developmental Services through Arbor Circle would be a good fit to address the feelings of anxiety and would support the baby's development. Katie talked to Paula about the importance of asking others for support, and sent her information about postpartum depression and anxiety. Paula was happy to receive additional information to help learn about ways to manage how she was feeling.

Two weeks after the initial call, Paula was excited to share that she had completed her intake appointment with the new program earlier that day and was looking forward to her next visit. Paula said that she was feeling much better knowing that she had the support to make sure that she was healthy and that her new baby was reaching developmental milestones.



# READY BY FIVE

## EARLY LEARNING AND PARENT SUPPORT

### HOME VISITING

Becoming a parent is an amazing but challenging experience. There is no instruction manual or simple “how-to” guide when it comes to giving a baby a great start. Thankfully, though, there is Home Visiting -- a type of service proven to help parents be better parents and prepare children for success in school and life.

A home visitor is a trained provider -- such as a nurse or parent educator -- who offers personalized support that helps parents build their skills and understanding of how young children grow, develop, and learn. Services can be delivered with regular visits to a family’s home or another comfortable setting. In a pandemic, Home Visiting can be virtual through video conferencing.

Home Visiting service providers have been awarded a total of \$2,880,558 in Ready by Five funding. Grantees include Strong Beginnings operated by Spectrum Health System, Baby Scholars operated by Spectrum Health System, Bright Beginnings operated by Kent ISD, D.A. Blodgett – St. John’s, MomsBloom, Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, Easterseals Michigan, Family Futures, and Camp Fire West Michigan 4C.

### PLAY AND LEARNS

Play is how children learn. It’s how little ones explore the world around them and discover how things work. When adults play with young children, they can introduce them to new ideas and nurture their development.

Play & Learn Groups are facilitated groups that support two audiences at once: parents and/or caregivers and their young children. Kids engage in group and individual play activities, while the adults build their understanding of child development and how they can provide learning opportunities at home.

Five organizations are receiving a total of \$1,586,056 in Ready by Five funding to provide Play & Learn Groups: Camp Fire West Michigan 4C, Cherry Health, Comprehensive Therapy Center, Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, and Grand Rapids Community College. Like other service providers, these organizations found new ways to reach families during the quarantine, like videos that model things families can do at home, “play and learn in a bag” kits that provide books and other materials for at-home activities, and question and answer sessions via Zoom.

“ *Before the Little Scholars program, I was unaware of the dos and the don’ts when it comes to playing with my child and how to engage with her. I now know how to keep her self-esteem up by participating and know how to participate with them. It gives her the option to open up or show her personality. This program is valuable because it gives me time to play with my child for 45 minutes or an hour. It’s important to spend that time with your child or children.* ”

- Parent at a Camp Fire West Michigan 4C Playgroup







# READY BY FIVE

## HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

### HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Prevention and early intervention are critical when it comes to children's development. If a young child has a delay or disability, identifying it and addressing it early leads to better results long term. Healthy Development services supported by the Ready by Five Millage provide parents with important information about how to support their children's learning and growth. They also help families know what to look for to see if their children are meeting developmental milestones or if there may be reason to seek help.

Organizations that provide Healthy Development services have been awarded a total of \$1,715,010. They are Arbor Circle, Cherry Health, Family Futures, Family Promise, and Ready for School.

*During summer 2020, parents were stressed trying to figure out whether children would be attending school in-person, virtually, or a hybrid option. Reach Out and Read West MI and Family Futures knew that whatever happened, families would need basic school supplies. They relieved some of the stress by teaming up to deliver more than 750 Kindergarten Readiness Toolkits to five-year-old children in Kent County.*

*Family Futures operates a program called Connections, which helps parents grow more confident by helping them recognize and support appropriate developmental milestones for young children. Holland/Zeeland-based Ready for School is the West MI Affiliate of Reach Out and Read, a national program that incorporates books into pediatric care visits and encourages families to read aloud together. Ready for School was*

### HEALTHY AND SAFE HOMES

The community has made great progress in removing lead and other hazards from families' homes, but there are still many children whose environments threaten their health and safety. In addition to lead poisoning -- which can cause irreversible brain damage -- unsafe conditions in a home can lead to asthma, other health concerns, and unintentional injuries. All of it can be prevented if the hazards are identified and removed.

Ready by Five funding is providing \$1,423,909 to three organizations whose services support Healthy and Safe Homes: Cherry Health, Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan, and the Kent County Health Department.

*preparing to expand the program to Kent County after receiving funding from Ready by Five. Those plans were temporarily disrupted by COVID-19, so the organization looked for a new approach to reach local families. It turned to the Connections team to help identify children most in need of Kindergarten Readiness Kits.*

*The Ready for School team got together to assemble 757 of the kits, which included pencils, glue sticks, books, markers, and resources for parents to continue to play and interact with their kindergartner. Both teams delivered the kits to each child's home in hopes that it would set up the family for a successful school year. Although the school year looks different than we imagined, hundreds of local children were better prepared for kindergarten this year due to these efforts.*





# BIRTH EQUITY

A healthy birthweight is at least five-and-a-half pounds. Newborns weighing less than that can be at increased risk of delays, particularly in early literacy development and math. The most recent data from 2018 show low birthweight for nearly eight percent of all births in Kent County – or about 680 babies. That includes:

- 6.4% of White babies,
- 8.8% of Hispanic/Latinx babies, and
- 15.3% of Black babies.

*\*Source: KConnect Data Dashboard*

The health of a baby at birth can have a lasting impact on his or her development, learning, and behavior, ultimately impacting success in school and beyond. Birthweight is one key measure of how healthy a newborn is, and in Kent County, Black babies are more than twice as likely as White babies to be born at a low birthweight.

Research shows a wide array of factors influence birthweight, including lack of medical care and/or insurance, the health of the mother, racism, culturally-insensitive care, and social determinants of health such as lack of adequate housing, living wages, and nutritious food.

Kent County has a new strategy to reduce the racial disparities in birth outcomes: community-based doulas of color. Highly-trained doulas that are of and from the same community as their clients will provide support and education prenatally through the 18

birth and postpartum period. It is an evidence-based, culturally responsive strategy that has led to positive outcomes in other communities, including reduced infant mortality and increases in healthy birthweights and breastfeeding. Additionally, it helps diversify the healthcare workforce through training and support of Black and Latinx doulas.

Baxter Community Center is the host site of the pilot project that launched in August and is expected to serve about 275 mothers and babies a year. This birth equity strategy was developed through a collaboration between KConnect, First Steps Kent, the Essential Needs Task Force, and Strong Beginnings, along with local doulas and other community partners. Heart of West Michigan United Way is the fiscal sponsor for the pilot, and technical assistance will be provided by HealthConnect One. Steelcase Foundation and the Michigan Health Endowment Fund have provided a total of \$190,000 in grants for the pilot.

“ ***Our community is showing a commitment to a vision that places women of color at the center of all care provided and also gives these women, a platform to be heard, to make an impact. This program becoming a reality means that we’ve listened, we will continue to listen, and we’re doing the work to address the disparities we see in populations of color.*** ”

***- Kiara Baskin, Program Manager for Day One Doula Collective***



# EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Kent County families have spent much of 2020 changing their course of action amid new uncertainties and realities. The stress is not only connected to a global pandemic, but also brought on by acts of hatred, racism, and political unrest that is being felt both nationally and locally.

First Steps Kent does and has always felt the anguish of injustice for people of color. That is why we intently focus on creating lasting change starting with our youngest children.

We are committed to advancing equity and inclusion so that all children grow up healthy, safe, and strong. We do this by addressing systemic inequities within communities of color and advocating for those who are economically marginalized.

Equity and inclusion have always been embedded in our work, but this year felt different. How are we keeping it at the forefront of what we do?

Equity is written into the Ready by Five requests

for proposals to make sure organizations that apply for funding have a plan to reach all children and families in Kent County. The team that makes funding recommendations includes a diverse group of parents who bring lived experience to the decision-making process.

Our strategic plan has Equity and Inclusion as the overarching strategy, stating that it is “Everywhere” and “Everyone’s Job.” The goal is a lofty one: no racial or economic disparities in outcomes for children.

This year, we asked our staff and board to take the time to reflect on what equity means to them, encouraging them to learn and take action.

First Steps Kent began a project to help guide parents and future educators on the importance of teaching anti-bias, anti-racist principles to even the youngest students and children.

With our partners, First Steps Kent is committed to changing outcomes for families, one child at a time.



# FINANCIALS

OCTOBER 1, 2018 - SEPTEMBER 30, 2019

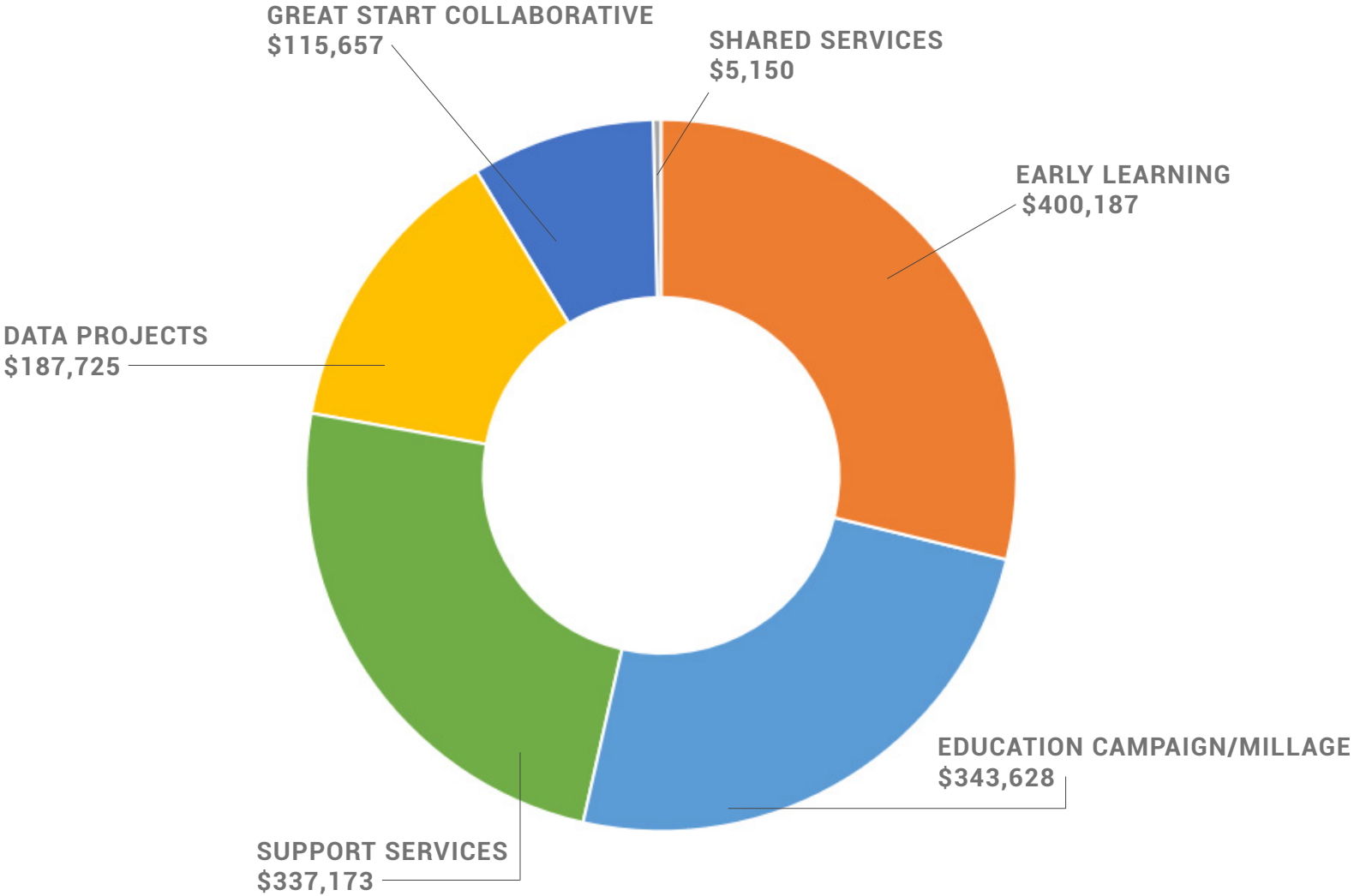
## REVENUE AND SUPPORT\*

TOTAL REVENUE, SUPPORT AND NET ASSETS = \$1,557,034

## EXPENSES\*

TOTAL = \$1,389,520

*\* FINANCIALS REPRESENT THE 2018/2019 FISCAL YEAR FOR FIRST STEPS KENT*





# THANK YOU

## YOU'RE AMAZING

First Steps Kent has a lot to be grateful for. We want to say thank you. Thank you to the child care and Ready by Five providers who have stepped up and done their best to support our families. Thank you to families who have hung in there and done their best to support their child's development during this past year. Thank you to the community for supporting the providers, families, and one another in such meaningful ways. Thank you to our funders for being very thoughtful, flexible, and equitable during this unprecedented time for young children and families in Kent County.

We want to thank our generous funders for their support of First Steps Kent and their commitment to young children in our community.

- Consumers Energy
- Doug & Maria DeVos Foundation
- Frey Foundation
- Grand Rapids Community Foundation
- Heart of West Michigan United Way
- Jandernoa Foundation
- Keller Foundation
- Kent County
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Kate and Richard Wolters Foundation
- Pritzker Children's Initiative
- Secchia Family Foundation
- Steelcase Foundation
- Wege Foundation



## THE COMMISSION

The First Steps Kent Commission is committed to making Kent County a community in which all young children and their families can thrive. The Commission serves as our Board of Directors.



Kate Pew Wolters  
Co-Chair,  
Kate and Richard  
Wolters Foundation

Lew Chamberlin  
Co-Chair,  
West Michigan  
Whitecaps

Bob Herr  
Secretary-Treasurer,  
Community Representative

Amanda Barbour  
Children's Healing Center

Ron Caniff  
Kent ISD

Kristina Donaldson  
Parent Representative

Lynne Ferrell  
Frey Foundation

Claire Guisfredi  
North Kent Connect

Maureen Hale  
Great Start Collaborative  
Sue Jandernoa  
Community Representative

Melinda Johnson, MD  
Community Representative

Karen O'Donovan  
Community Representative

Dr. Juan Olivarez  
Johnson Center for  
Philanthropy at GVSU

Kelsey Perdue  
Michigan League for  
Public Policy

Julie Ridenour  
Steelcase Foundation

Milt Rohwer  
Community Representative

Michelle Van Dyke  
Heart of West Michigan  
United Way

Carl Ver Beek  
Community Representative

Sean Welsh  
PNC Bank

Doug DeVos  
Emeritus





**Early Investment. Lifelong Success.**

[www.firststepskent.org](http://www.firststepskent.org) | [firststeps@firststepskent.org](mailto:firststeps@firststepskent.org)  
401 Hall St SW, Suite 385 | Grand Rapids, MI 49503 | 616.635.1003