



The History of Kent County's Early Childhood System 1990-2019

The Kent County community has a strong history of collaboration and innovation to support children and their families. Over the last three 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. 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 included family support services, early intervention for children at risk of abuse or neglect, and substance abuse services. Kent was the first county in the state to commit general fund resources to services for children and families and continues to invest annual in the Prevention Initiative.

Shortly thereafter, the Kent County Family & Children's Coordinating Council formed an Early Childhood Committee that was charged with developing a system of support for young children and their parents. The funding to begin that work was provided by a federal Early Learning Opportunities Act grant. Beginning in January 2003, groups were convened to identify and define various components of the early childhood system, including a governance structure.

The committee studied several governance models that had been adopted in other communities around the country. Eventually it settled on something often referred to as the "Power Sneezers Model", in which influential leaders in the community raise awareness of the importance of early

childhood and advocate for increased investment in policies and programs that support young children and their families. Locally, that approach led to 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.

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, which had begun serving as fiduciary for the early childhood systems building work in 2002.

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.

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 work that continues today.

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 at the time 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 the First Steps partnerships and the Early Childhood Children's Commission. The Committee emphasized the need for independence and neutrality and recommended a new non-profit organization: First Steps Kent, with the Early Childhood Children's Commission to

serve as its board of directors. The process to form an independent 510(C)(3) organization was completed in 2009.

In its early years, First Steps Kent worked with the Great Start Collaborative and a diverse coalition of community partners – including parents – to implement the recommendations made in *Making Strides*. That included launching three demonstration projects that were intended to fill identified gaps in services in the community. Each of the three was independently evaluated and shown to be reaching its goals and objectives. After the demonstration phase ended, the three programs were moved to other organizations in the community where they continue to evolve to best meet the needs of children and families in Kent County.

Today, First Steps Kent continues to work with community partners to build a comprehensive early childhood system, which means having the programs, policies, and supports in place that help all young children and their families thrive. First Steps Kent does that work by:

- Convening parents, service providers, funders, advocates, and other stakeholders to ensure high quality programs and services are accessible to families and they are well coordinated and effective.
- Building public support for early childhood by educating the community about the importance of early childhood development and advocating for policies that support young children and their families.
- Researching what is working effectively across the country and finding innovative approaches to address gaps and disparities in Kent County, improving equitable outcomes for young children.
- Using data to make decisions and measuring progress, so that services and programs are evidenced based and aimed at our community's most pressing needs.
- Securing resources that support the community's early childhood system.

First Steps Kent led a successful ballot initiative in 2018 to secure dedicated and sustainable public funding for programs that improve the health, school readiness, and well-being of children under age five across the community. In November 2018, Kent County voters overwhelmingly approved the Ready by Five Early Childhood Proposal. It is a .25 mill property tax increase that will generate about \$5.7 million a year from 2019 to 2024 – more than \$34 million total.

The Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage will pay for services such as home visiting, play and learn groups, developmental screenings, and support to help families access the help they need. First Steps Kent is administering the millage funding, which is being awarded in a competitive process to community-based organizations that serve young children and their families.

The early childhood system as it exists today is based on decades of hard work and collaboration from parents, educators, service providers, county government, and business and philanthropic leaders. Continuing to strengthen it, so it works for all young children and their families, requires ongoing commitment from those who raise and love young children, those

who work within the early childhood system, those who make policies, and those who want this community to be as equitable and prosperous as possible.

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