

FIRST STEPS & THE GREAT START COLLABORATIVE

Kent County, MI



ORIGIN

While the First Steps Commission was formed in 2009, Kent County's collaborative efforts to strengthen its early childhood system date back to the early 1990s. In 2005, Michigan's state-to-local early childhood system structure was established in 2005. Stakeholders in Kent County won a grant from the state and formed a local Great Start Collaborative and Great Start Parent Coalition in 2007. In 2009, the First Steps Commission was created to provide an independent and neutral entity that could lead the community's efforts to strengthen and coordinate early childhood services to better support young children and their families. Kent's Great Start Collaborative is housed within First Steps.

GOALS

- Parents can efficiently navigate and access a system of coordinated and aligned early childhood services beginning prenatally and continuing through third grade.
- All vulnerable 3- and 4-year olds have access to high quality preschool.
- Parents of every infant and toddler have access to home visiting services, especially vulnerable children.
- Quality programs serving young children have sustainable funding and public support.

KEY STRATEGIES

- Align and coordinate early childhood services, identifying system gaps and developing collaborative approaches to address them.
- Engage parents in early childhood and home visiting services through a gateway model and the development of a central resource and referral system.
- Increase community understanding of early childhood and build public will to invest in young children through a strategic communications plan.
- Strengthen connections between members of the business, educational, faith-based, senior, health care, philanthropic and public safety sectors to develop understanding of early childhood services as a comprehensive, coordinated system.
- Build community support for a scholarship model to provide preschool access for at-risk 3-year olds.

LEAD AGENCY

The First Steps Commission, which houses the Great Start Collaborative

MISSION

First Steps' vision is that every young child in Kent County enters kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed in school and life.

INITIATIVE BUDGET START DATE

\$1.5 million 2009

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Kent County, MI

KEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Population
615,381 (2014 ACS)

Population Under 5
43,778 (2014 ACS)

Percent of Children in Poverty
21.4% (2014 ACS)

Percent of Newborns at Low Birth Weight
8.0% (2013, MI Dept. of Community Health, kidscount.org)

Percent of Children in Food-Insecure Households
18.2% (2013, Feeding America)

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INNOVATION OF NOTE

Welcome Home Baby (WHB) is an evidence-informed model begun in 2012 by First Steps Kent. Welcome Home Baby (WHB) is designed “to be the primary gateway to Kent County’s early childhood system, connecting with new parents in the first days of their child’s life.” WHB is an evidence-informed model that has proven successful in connecting the mothers of newborns – before hospital discharge – to a one-time home visit by a Registered Nurse and Lactation Specialist to help educate families on relevant maternal-infant topics, and to make objective referrals to community-based resources based on observable need, standardized assessment and parent choice. The program is universal, voluntary and no-cost for all first-time parents and parents 25 and younger in Kent County.

In 2015, Phillip Wyatt-Knowlton’s (Battle Creek, MI) evaluation of WHB found mothers participating in a one-time WHB Home Visit are five times more likely to have Home Visiting services underway at 30 days than mothers receiving referrals from the hospital setting.

+ EARLY CHILDHOOD-LINC

An initiative of the Center for the Study of Social Policy, **Early Childhood-LINC** (Learning and Innovation Network for Communities) is developed by and for communities. Our mission is to support families and improve results for young children in communities across the country with a focus on accelerating the development of effective, integrated, local early childhood systems.

MEASURES OF PROGRESS

APPROACH

Impact is measured through a variety of factors, including:

- Advocacy achievements
- Community-level indicators aligned with program-level outcomes
- Effectiveness and impact, including child and adult outcomes
- Cost-benefit/ROI of programming
- Awareness of the importance of the childhood system for example, through changes in polling data

INDICATORS

- 2015 Assessments of a preschool scholarship model showed:
 - Children with the lowest oral vocabulary upon entry gained the most from two years of preschool (an increase of 17 points on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test).
 - At the end of two years of preschool, nearly all children attained language and phonological awareness skills predictive of reading success.
- Assessments of the Welcome Home Baby (WHB) initiative (see sidebar for more information) show:
 - WHB provided 1,880 one-time home visits, and completed 1,500 referrals to Home Visiting services in 2013-14.
 - Based on May, 2015 data, 99.4 percent of the infants who completed a WHB home visit were connected to a medical home, with the first pediatric appointment occurring an average of 1.4 business days after discharge.
 - Over 99 percent of families who received home visits received education about relevant maternal/infant topics and community agencies.

STRUCTURE & LEADERSHIP

First Steps is the early childhood backbone organization in Kent County, as established by the First Steps Commission. Members of the Commission include the Superintendent of Schools, the chair of the Great Start Collaborative, the chair of the Kent County Family & Children’s Coordinating Council, a co-chair of KConnect (a cradle-to-career collective impact initiative) and a liaison to the Great Start Parent Coalition. The Great Start Parent Coalition represents the “grassroots,” keeping First Steps’ work representative of parents and families. The First Steps Commission is the “grass-tops,” providing high-level advocacy and representing sectors such as business, philanthropy and government. The Great Start Collaborative represents the provider community, or the “blades,” connecting the grassroots and the grass-tops and informing each with research, best practices and data.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parents are deeply involved in the work and leadership of Great Start and First Steps. Parents are represented on the First Steps Commission, in workgroups and at Great Start Collaborative and Parent Coalition meetings. At the Collaborative meetings, parents report out to early childhood professionals and service providers and engage in discussions and collaborative projects.

First Steps & Great Start also employ three part-time parent liaisons who lead the Parent Coalition and undergo training in parent leadership, community organizing, early childhood health and development and advocacy. Parents support service-projects, serve as ambassadors at community events and advocate for legislation and policies to benefit young children and families through annual parent-legislator discussions, advocacy trainings and community events.

FINANCING

First Steps is supported by a mix of public and private funders, with about two-thirds from business and private foundations. Funding for Great Start comes from the Department of Education’s Office of Great Start. A major goal of First Steps is to diversify and broaden its funding base, seeking out more sustainable options for continued and future financing.