

## **Early Learning Strategies**

The Welborn Baptist Foundation sees a mission-critical need for continued and increased intervention in the first few years of a child's life. Tri-State children should be both optimally ready for kindergarten and continuing their academic progress by meeting or exceeding benchmark levels by the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. If children are unprepared cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally for kindergarten, they are unable to fully capture opportunities to learn and can quickly fall behind. Research and observations support the wisdom that until the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade children are learning to read, and from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade on, they need to be able to read in order to learn. If children do not possess adequate reading and math skills by the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, they are at an extreme disadvantage.

A precursor to kindergarten readiness and meeting 3<sup>rd</sup> grade benchmarks is the quality of experiences during the first 5 years of life. Research also indicates that although social skills can continue to be learned after the age of 4, there is a small window before that age when capabilities like emotional control, habitual ways of responding, vision, and hearing pathways are all formed. Early experiences during this window will literally change brain and behavioral development. This window of time during the lifespan is a one-time opportunity for meaningful intervention. In further support of the need for early intervention, there are critical community health and well-being issues that are impacted by what goes on with children and families during the early childhood years.

Developmental screenings are not used consistently or systematically in the region, leaving questions about the prevalence of developmental issues, and delaying appropriate interventions. Research shows that best practice interventions during this critical developmental window can have a positive impact on the variety of social, health, and mental health related issues that go beyond educational and developmental preparedness. With early intervention, there is an opportunity to create positive habits in families and children that will forestall expensive and hard-to-treat community issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect.

While endorsing all areas that lead to optimal child development, the Foundation has identified the following four strategies for its investments:

**Family Engagement:** Research and clinical experience from a range of disciplines—including neuroscience, behavioral research, program evaluation, and economics—demonstrates that the first experiences and relationships in life play a critical role in a child's ability to grow up healthy and ready to learn. If very young children have positive, predictable relationships with parents or other caregivers, they will feel safe from harm and secure that their basic needs will be met. Their energy can therefore be spent on exploring the world around them and having the positive early learning experiences that will nurture developing brains and help to achieve healthy growth and development.

As the child's first and most important teachers, families play a key role in development in these early years. Yet many families do not understand their critical role, and are not equipped to provide these rich experiences. In an effort to strengthen these skills, the Foundation's interest is in programs that provide best practice supports to parents and families that will improve the levels of care and interaction with their child that support optimal development and learning.

**Provider Effectiveness:** Another key role in child outcomes is that played by the provider of child care and/or pre-school education. In Indiana, two of every three children aged 0-5 need care because of working parents. Yet only about 13% are in 'known care' of any quality. Quality of the early childhood educational experience is the determinant of whether the long term results cited above will be realized. Research suggests that high quality early care and education programs can have a significant impact on improving the cognitive, academic and social skills of all children, especially those most at risk for later school failure. Indiana has developed a voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) to assess and improve the quality of early care and education programs for children ages birth to five and older. Indiana has 2,476 programs participating in Paths to QUALITY™ with a capacity to serve 75,674 Hoosier children, a 25 percent increase from 2011. Similar to rating levels used for other services, Paths to Quality assigns a quality rating to participating early childhood or school-age programs, many of which receive public funding and which collectively take care of hundreds of thousands of children each year. A QRIS may also be used to increase parent and consumer awareness about which programs meet defined levels of quality and to align program funding with quality ratings. A key component of quality in early learning is provider effectiveness. In support of higher quality childcare, the Foundation's interest is in programs that deliver effective instruction and high quality classroom environments/ interactions.

**Affordable High Quality Enrollment:** Affordability of care is another key driver of early learning success. For example, the cost of quality center-based care in Indiana ranges from \$8,800 to \$11,750 annually. A family at the poverty level would spend over 40% of their income solely to provide care for one child. Without some level of public/private funding support, the likely result is family, friend and neighbor care of indeterminate quality. This is a major issue for parents across the nation and in Indiana. Many Hoosier families struggle to afford early childhood education. More than 45 percent of young Hoosier children live in families whose incomes fall at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level.

In response to the need, Indiana has successfully launched two state-funded pre-K pilot programs to expand the enrollment of low-income children in high-quality early childhood education:

### Early Education Matching Grant (EEMG)

- In the 2014-2015 school year, EEMG awarded grants to 30 high-quality early childhood education programs in 15 counties to enroll nearly 500 4-year-olds living in families at or below 100 percent of the Federal poverty level. Most recently, a second round of 21 EEMG grants for the 2015-2016 school year were awarded to high-quality early childhood education programs serving approximately 500 children across 14 counties.

### On My Way Pre-K

- In addition to EEMG, approximately 1,600 additional 4-year-olds living in families at or below 127 percent of the Federal poverty level will attend high-quality early childhood education programs in five pilot counties – Allen, Jackson, Lake, Marion and Vanderburgh – in the 2015–2016 school year as part of the On My Way Pre-K pilot program. Purdue University is conducting a longitudinal evaluation of the children enrolled in On My Way Pre-K and will be tracking them through 3rd grade.

The Foundation will pursue opportunities to ensure that more children, especially at-risk children have access to financial resources that make high quality care and education affordable.

**Academic Supports:** Over the past 25 years, there have been extraordinary developments in research, policy, and practice relating to programs for elementary-aged children who are struggling to learn to read. While there has long been concern about learning disabilities, in the elementary grades, success in school is virtually synonymous with success in reading, and children without strong reading skills by middle school are headed for disaster. Children who fail to read in the early grades incur so many costs to the education system in special education, remediation, grade repetition, delinquency, and ultimate dropout that even very expensive interventions can be justified on cost-effectiveness grounds alone. Further, reading failure is not distributed randomly, but is concentrated among schools serving many disadvantaged, minority, and limited English proficient children. It is in the early elementary grades where the gap in performance between children of different races first appears, and this gap is perhaps the most important policy issue in education in the U.S. Research and development since the 1980's has created a sense of optimism that most children who start off their time in school struggling to learn to read can be quickly brought into the mainstream in this crucial skill.

Today, there are many programs designed to help struggling readers, and there is much research on factors that affect the impact of tutoring and other interventions. There is also much research on the effects on struggling readers of classroom programs and comprehensive school reform models that impact entire schools. Similarly, research shows that the development of mathematics skills early on may be an even greater

predictor of later school success. Early knowledge of math not only predicts later success in math, but also predicts later reading achievement even better than early reading skills.

Young children have a surprising capacity to learn substantial mathematics, but most children in the U.S. have a discouraging lack of opportunities to do so. Too many children not only start behind, but they also begin a negative and immutable trajectory in mathematics, with insidious long-term effects. These negative effects are in one of the most important subjects of academic life and also affect children's overall life course.

Schools themselves play a key role, but best practice models also tap community resources to augment school instruction. The Foundation will prioritize non-school programs that seek to narrow the learning gap among K-3 students.

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