



Hub Community Spotlight: First Steps Kent

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The NCIT Newsletter offers *Spotlights*, a regular monthly feature that provides an ongoing opportunity to share the work happening at the state or community level, and foster connections among grantees. This document highlights the work of First Steps Kent, the community grantee in Michigan.

First Steps Kent's Prenatal-to-Three Goals

We see it is an entire landscape that has a variety of goals that we emphasize, including children's health, birth equity, navigation, and promoting a "no wrong door" perspective for families. Eliminating poverty and elevating prosperity for our families is so important for us, especially with our youngest children. But the biggest goal, the one that we share with our state and our entire community, and now it seems the nation, is making sure that there is access to quality child care. That really is where we all align.

Challenges to Achieving Our Goals

The first challenge is making our efforts work in a non-partisan way, making sure that the way we elevate the messages really resonates with all people throughout our community. That includes government and the people with political power. The second challenge is securing adequate funding across the early childhood landscape. Sometimes we have that feast or famine attitude with all funding, but it is so important to make sure that it reaches across all programs.

With regard to access to quality child care prior to the pandemic, we saw the number of child care providers declining at an alarming rate, and new child care providers were not coming into the industry. And then COVID hit. The pandemic made it so much worse for the providers who were hanging on by a thread to access funds, to stay open, to actually earn a living because when our economies closed up, they lost their ability to care for children because everything shut down. Their ability to earn an income was devastated. We reacted by looking for ways in our community to support them, to bolster them, to make sure they had access to CARES Act dollars and funding, supplies, equipment, everything they needed to stay open.

How the Rescue Plan will Impact our Work with Providers

The Rescue Plan is a lifeline that is desperately needed for child care. The child care industry, our economy, and the business sector all rely on one another to keep the wheels going and the trains running on time. As we slowly reopen the economy, it is going to be essential that providers have access to dollars, but also the opportunity to make up for lost time and lost income. Many of these child care providers who participate in our surveys are two and three months behind on rent and mortgage payments and all the other bills families have to pay. It truly is going to be a rescue -- a lifeline -- for them, our families, and the child care industry.

Our Stakeholders

Our number one stakeholders are parents. We have tried to include them in planning all aspects of our work, making sure that parent voice is elevated and they are at all of our tables, including at the board level. On any projects that we are thinking of, we try to include parents, and broaden our net of parents so that we hear multiple voices. Beyond parents, local foundations are crucial, as well as education, government, and especially the business sector because having that power and influence behind the early childhood work is essential to getting things done and making sure that we are reaching our goals.

Supporting Families of Infants and Toddlers and Pregnant Women Facing Barriers to Services

As we allocate funding to providers, we emphasize birth equity at the systems level. And we have a local team, Infant Health Action Team (IHAT) through our county's health department. We work with a wide range of stakeholders and really look at the trends in and the research on birth equity. The county also has a lens that it uses for prevention. Our goal is to focus on health prenatally, at birth, and throughout a child's journey.

We started a campaign at the very beginning of the pandemic aimed at parents who were overwhelmed with taking on multiple new roles for their young children. It reminded them that they are their child's first and best teacher. Our point is that no matter how much time you have, it is the little things you do for your kids make a big impact. So, for example, sing songs, read to them. If they are getting more screen time, talk to them about what they are watching. All of these little things help to build their brains.

We are also creating a video series on how to teach your kids and/or students to be anti-bias as well as how to use anti-bias curriculum. We will embed this series in the local college curriculum. We will also use the series to educate parents on talking to their kids about anti-racist, anti-bias topics. This is intended to inform the next generation of kids.

Our intent is to impact the system in a lasting way. If we are able to enact this curriculum in the way we have planned, it will create equitable systems change. There will be multiple impacts, including on two- and three-year-old kids in early childhood classrooms experiencing racism for the first time. If we do this successfully, the curriculum will give teachers the tools to not shame children and to work through some of the issues that are going to come up.

The Impact of the Pritzker Initiative and our Governor on our Work

We are very fortunate that our state is very receptive to working together. This is due to the foresight of the Pritzker Initiative to fund both locally and the state so that not only can we partner and collaborate but there is encouragement for us to align; systems change is never going to happen without alignment. There is a great deal of power and influence behind the work. On February 11, our governor released her budget which included about \$370 million for child care. The state is in alignment with us in terms of increasing the subsidy and supporting child care providers. That coupled with what we see in the Rescue Act – approximately \$39 billion for child care – is certainly going to help.