

## Laying the Foundation for School Readiness

We know it really does take a community to raise a child. We also know—from talking with everyone from researchers and child development experts to kindergarten teachers—that preparing for school starts at birth. Read about the **7 elements** in our comprehensive approach to school readiness and **2 sets of results**.

**1** Regular **home visiting** up to age 3 to help young parents manage stress, connect to resources, learn about child development, and understand their role as their baby's first teacher. Two home visiting providers are the core of an early childhood network focused on kindergarten readiness. Together, we are measuring effectiveness using normed tools and collecting data over several years to evaluate the effects of home visiting on parental stress, beliefs, and behaviors. With continuing endowment gifts, investment growth, and outside grants, ECF increased its annual support by 25% since 2008, years in which public funding and many private foundation grants decreased.

**2** High-quality, full-day **preschool** for 3- and 4-year-olds is a next step in preventing the achievement gap between low-income and middle-class children. Evanston has excellent child care programs and preschools, but, state subsidies for low-income families do not come close to covering the cost of providing services. Absent adequate state funding for high-quality early care and education, many low-income working families choose lower quality alternatives. Mothers who cannot work have no access to child care subsidies. As children turn 3 and age out of home visiting, we provide some scholarships that increase options for families. A collaboration between Infant Welfare Society and Cherry Preschool allows several children to enroll in and attend two years of high-quality preschool. Of 31 children who have turned 3 so far, 13 are enrolled in a high-quality, full-day preschool and 18 are continuing in extended home visiting. *Learn more. [Link to story about grant for extended home visiting](#)*

**3 Strong organizations and a strong community** create opportunities for children to grow up healthy, nurtured and well-educated. The Foundation provides professional development on timely topics, a resource for all 0-to5 providers in Evanston. When the state cancelled funds for the Infant Mental Health Consultancy, ECF stepped in to replace funds for Evanston. A coordinated community infrastructure to facilitate “positive parenting,” with every Evanstonian able to quickly access local services for children from birth to age five is a long-term goal.. For now, ECF participates in initiatives such as *Little and Learning*, an Evanston150 project (link to website) and a Pioneering Healthy Communities project to combat obesity in the 0-5 years (link to website), and ECF provides funding to the Child Parent Center (CPC) project (link) enhancing parents’ engagement in their children’s preK to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education. Strengthening our system and families’ experiences of it helps all Evanston children.

**4 Excellent teachers, with top-notch qualifications.** Agencies need support to recruit and retain outstanding teachers and to compensate them adequately as they seek and attain additional degrees. Insufficient resources have limited funding for this part of our project model to offering excellent, low-cost activities through biannual network meetings of early learning professionals and to small annual grants that connect teachers to professional development opportunities organized by Childcare Network of Evanston.

**5 Research and evaluation** to track our progress *and* to learn lessons that can be applied in Evanston and elsewhere. Because our project aims to strengthen families, the first learning environment for babies, baseline data and annual assessments of families engaged in home visiting are collected and analyzed by a research team at Northern Illinois University. Annual trainings in four assessment tools are conducted by NIU for every home visitor in Evanston, regardless of the funding source supporting their work. We assess patterns, share data with our partners, and encourage staffing adjustments to achieve strongest outcomes for families and most effective use of ECF funds. We track retention rates and have worked with researchers at Northwestern and at Erikson Institute to assess aspects of parental satisfaction.

**6 Staff infrastructure.** Putting all the pieces together and partnering with the community in a meaningful way takes time and expertise. The Foundation is investing staff time and has engaged an experienced early childhood consultant to facilitate the learning community and ensure both high quality and continuity of our project. This investment gives ECF the capacity to maintain and develop the network despite changes in personnel in partner organizations.

**7 Maintaining focus on the ultimate goal of our impact plan—*every child ready for kindergarten leading to every youth ready for work*.** Identifying and addressing obstacles to change and taking advantage of new opportunities to advance toward our goals knits our partnership together. With a truly long-term horizon as the final measure of our success, today's investments must be highly effective in helping our youngest children, organizations that serve their families, and the early childhood care and education *system* as a whole.

**7+2 Seven program elements + two levels.** Our first grants

in 2007 funded home visiting and supportive services for 50 low-income families, and creation of a network of providers to strengthen connections around one shared goal: kindergarten readiness. Our 50 families added significantly to the reach of home visiting into high-risk families, while ECF's neutral convening forged a network that strengthen Evanston's early childhood *system*.

**8 Measuring engagement and effectiveness: families..** Families start and stay in home visiting, despite their stresses of low income, single parenting, insecure food and/or housing, mental illness, domestic abuse, and feelings of social isolation, because they seek better lives for their children. Annual data collected each May by our two grantee partners tell us:

**555 families engaged in home visiting since March 2007**

50 of 143 families currently engaged are funded by ECF  
266 developmental screenings were done in 2011-12

**We are reaching different community segments in each program:**

- 2-parent households just 8% at Infant Welfare, 46% at D.65
- Majority African-American families at Infant Welfare
- Majority Latino families at D.65
- Infant Welfare families are mainly inter-generational, very few at D65
- Only 7% of participating adults are grandparents

**Of 3-year old “graduates” of home visiting, 31 to date:**

- 13 children registered in preschool
- 18 children continue in extended home visiting

**Measures of parental stress and of satisfaction with program:**

In most periods since 2007, our home visiting assessments demonstrate effectiveness in reducing parental stress and increased feelings of support, but given families’ environmental variables and agency staff changes, there is no constantly rising curve. Our programs perform as well as or better than high-quality Healthy Families programs across the state. Retention rates for families were averaging 77% in May of 2012.