

Big Plans for the Littlest Learners

Early learning advocates lead the way for quality



With so many curious hands and busy bodies, it could be chaos. But at the Center for Infants and Toddlers just west of downtown Indianapolis, calm reigns.

Toddlers climb on soft play structures, color with fat, washable markers at the pint-sized tables, or reach for brightly colored toys and blocks on low shelves. Teachers sing songs, gently defuse tempers and offer small snacks. Wide windows let in natural light and offer a view of an enclosed, grassy playscape specially designed for young children.

The center serves 56 infants and toddlers in six classrooms.

There is a full kitchen to prepare hot meals. Teachers post photos and frequent updates on a touch-screen computer so parents can see what their children are up to during the day with the swipe of a smartphone application.

This is early learning done right, and many of its qualities could be – and should be – available to more of Indiana’s young children, according to Ted Maple, president and CEO of Early Learning Indiana, which operates this center and nine others in central Indiana.

“Parents want their children to be safe and in an environment where learning is possible, even at the very youngest ages,” Maple says.



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 Ted Maple (right) is president and CEO of Early Learning Indiana, which is working statewide to strengthen preschool programs. Early Learning’s oldest center is Day Early Learning Lilly Family Center (above).

With more than a century of experience in providing high-quality child care and learning programs for young children in Indianapolis, Early Learning Indiana (formerly Day Nursery Association) is widening its sphere of influence with a \$20 million grant from Lilly Endowment.

The 2014 grant will enable Early Learning Indiana to increase the quality and quantity of early childhood education opportunities across Indiana, helping at least 400 early childhood education providers in a variety of settings, including congregations and homes.

Early Learning Indiana will help providers improve curriculum, build new classrooms, strengthen business practices, support professional development for teachers, and engage parents about the importance of high-quality child care and preschool programs.

In addition, a \$2.5 million Endowment grant to United Way of Central Indiana (UWCI) will support its efforts to strengthen early childhood programs in Indianapolis and the surrounding six counties. The grant will support the creation of new classrooms and high-quality spaces for young children and help centers invigorate staff development and strengthen curriculum.

A strong case for investment

Evidence shows that children who have a good start in life before age 5 enter school as stronger students, Maple says, and they tend to thrive in elementary school. In addition, he says, their parents learn to value education as a long-term proposition, which can lead to better outcomes for families, a better workforce and better communities.

“There’s enough research out there that points to long-term benefits to make a strong case for early childhood education,” Maple says.



The reality of the modern workforce also points to the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences. The state of Indiana’s Early Learning Advisory Committee reports that:

- ◀ Nearly 350,000 Indiana children age 5 years and younger come from families in which all parents in the household are in the labor force.
- ◀ More than 136,000 children of these ages are from families with incomes below the federal poverty level.
- ◀ More than 200,000 Indiana children are cared for by relatives or by unlicensed or unregistered providers while their parents work.
- ◀ Many children from low-income families start kindergarten and first grade at least one to two years behind children from more affluent families.

But children in high-quality preschool programs are another story. Compared to children who do not attend these programs, they gain about one-third of a year in additional learning in language, reading and math skills. They exhibit reduced aggressive behavior and demonstrate higher levels of attentiveness and classroom engagement, according to the state’s Early Learning Advisory Committee report.

Early care and education can support families and communities, as well, by

helping reduce workplace absenteeism among parents and increase parents’ productivity on the job. There is evidence that strong early learning programs also support education across generations, as 80 percent of parents who attend community college report that availability of high-quality child care is very important in their decision to pursue continuing education.

Indiana needs to expand the accessibility and affordability of early childhood education, but it also needs to improve overall quality, according to Kevin Bain, appointed by Indiana Gov. Mike Pence to lead the Early Learning Advisory Committee.

Bain is chief executive officer of the Welborn Baptist Foundation in Evansville, which seeks to fund lasting, positive change in southwestern Indiana. More than a decade ago when the foundation looked at issues facing citizens, many problems seemed rooted in early childhood, Bain says.

“We determined that those first five years of life were critical. If things went well, it put a child on the road to future success.”

Welborn explored successful early childhood education programs in Fort Wayne. In 2000, the Early Childhood Alliance in Fort Wayne piloted Paths to QUALITY (PTQ), a child care quality rating system, in northeastern Indiana. Welborn was pleased that PTQ had helped programs improve and that it helped parents learn about high-quality early learning. In 2005 Welborn turned to 4C of Southern Indiana Inc. (4C) to provide family coaching about early learning and to bring PTQ to southwestern Indiana.

In 2008, Indiana adopted PTQ as its official statewide early learning rating and improvement system. The voluntary system helps early learning providers

demonstrate ongoing efforts to achieve higher standards of quality. The levels serve as guidelines for child care providers, families and others to know about the quality of care provided.

In addition to helping families find high-quality early learning programs in the Evansville area, 4C and Welborn have helped child care and preschool providers, particularly faith-based ministries and those in private homes, improve safety,

state. It's going to really turbocharge our efforts," Bain says.

The latest Endowment grants build on previous work. In 2012 Lilly Endowment helped launch UWCI's 10-year plan to increase the quality and quantity of early childhood education programs with a \$1 million grant. That same year, the Endowment granted \$1 million to the YMCA of Greater Indianapolis to create a high-quality preschool in Avondale

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Rene Withers (below) is coach coordinator for Child Care Answers, a program of Early Learning Indiana that trains preschool teachers (opposite).



strengthen child learning and achieve national accreditation, according to Bain.

Similar gains can happen statewide, Bain says.

"All the research shows that if you want to show results in terms of school readiness, it is a high-quality early childhood education experience that makes the difference."

"The Endowment grant builds capacity to strengthen quality levels across the

Meadows, an Indianapolis neighborhood with a high percentage of families living in poverty. In 2013 the Endowment approved a \$1 million grant to Early Learning Indiana to expand its early child care training programs.

In 2014 state lawmakers strengthened standards that child care providers must meet to receive public vouchers and increased the amount of voucher payments to families who choose

PTQ What is it?

In 2007 Indiana adopted the PTQ system, which is overseen by the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration. The system uses the following four-level scale for rating the quality of early childhood education providers:

- ◀ **level one: health and safety needs of children met**
- ◀ **level two: environment supports children's learning**
- ◀ **level three: planned curriculum guides child development and school readiness**
- ◀ **level four: national accreditation (the highest indicator of quality) is achieved**



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Teachers, with their children at Early Learning Lilly Family Center, are receiving mentoring and training, which are critical if Indiana providers are to improve.

programs with the strongest standards. The state also announced funding in 2014 for a \$10-million pilot program targeting 4-year-olds from low-income families in Allen, Jackson, Lake, Marion and Vanderburgh counties. UWCI is administering the Marion County pilot.

In addition, the city of Indianapolis in 2015 plans to embark on a five-year, \$40 million initiative to expand access to preschool in Marion County. City officials expect to commit \$20 million and businesses and nonprofits intend to raise another \$20 million. The initiative provides low-income families with scholarships to high-quality preschools and helps more preschools improve.

Eli Lilly and Company has played a leading role in mobilizing support for the city's initiative. According to Rob

Smith, president of Eli Lilly and Company Foundation, innovation-based companies like Lilly have a stake in improving education in Indianapolis. They must recruit, retain and engage great talent, and that becomes easier to accomplish when the city is strong and vibrant.

"Our corporate headquarters, our largest R&D footprint and more than 10,000 employees are in Indianapolis. Our success, therefore, is very much tied to the success of Indy," says Smith. "We believe one of the best ways we can strengthen the long-term prospects of our home city is to help more and more children gain access to a great education, including high-quality pre-k."

Demand for the highest levels of early childhood programs is only expected to increase as efforts to educate families about the importance of early learning take hold across the state.

Reaching providers

One strategy that works: training teachers and other providers and mentoring parents so they understand what quality looks like in early childhood settings.

On a Monday morning at Day Early Learning Lilly Family Center on the near-north side of Indianapolis, a class of 3- and 4-year-olds is starting the day with circle time. Teacher Nikkia Owens offers her hand to one nonconformist in the group. "Come stand next to me. Be my hand buddy," Owens says. "You're not in trouble, you're just keeping my hand warm."

It's a brief, positive interaction, but Owens' reassuring manner doesn't go unnoticed by Rene Withers, coach coordinator for Child Care Answers, part of the Indiana Child Care Resource and Referral network operated by Early Learning Indiana.

Withers is providing feedback to Owens as part of Child Care Answers'

support for early childhood education providers. She works in nine central Indiana counties, visiting homes, day care centers and child care ministries. Providers invite Withers to help them improve, whether they are starting at level one or, like Indianapolis' Day Early Learning Lilly Family Center, are already at level four on the PTQ system.

"We try to meet providers where they are," Withers says. "We look for their strengths, then offer them tools and resources they need. The goal is for every child to have a good early learning experience."

Withers has seen every kind of child care setting, from places that use television instead of teaching to others that insist on rigorous academic preparation using lots of worksheets for 3- and 4-year-old students.

She encourages providers to understand what is developmentally appropriate and adopt hands-on learning activities, using games instead of flash cards, for example, and small groups that allow teachers to spend more quality time with children. As a mentor, Withers helps child care providers with teacher-training resources, curricula and parent handbooks.

Providers and teachers are receptive, she says. "They want the knowledge and we are reaching them. I only see things getting better for everyone."

That's the goal, says Maple of Early Learning Indiana.

"The nature of this grant is to partner with organizations and communities to build and enhance great work," he says. "We need to make the most of our resources by working together."