



# SCHOOL READINESS

## THE CASE FOR ACTION

Quality early learning experiences for all children are critical to a community's economic success, a key driver of school readiness – and vital to improving high school graduation rates. Studies show that children entering kindergarten with the cognitive, social and emotional skills necessary for success are more likely to graduate high school.

That's because a child's early years, from birth until school age, are a unique period of growth and development: learning to walk and talk, beginning to think independently, understanding how to communicate and learning to control thoughts and emotions. All of those are critical early learning skills that build a foundation for successful future learning.

Four decades of research show that high quality early childhood experiences, inside and outside the home, can make a significant difference for children, creating a vital pathway for success in school and life.<sup>1</sup> Children's brains are being "hard-wired" in the first five years for future learning: communications, social/emotional skills and critical early learning skills are formed in the early years.

- Research in neuroscience shows the critical impact that relationships between children and caregivers have on the developing brain during the first months and years of life.<sup>2</sup>
- Brain development research also demonstrates that social, emotional and intellectual learning are inextricably linked. Supportive relationships and healthy interactions actually shape brain circuits and lay a foundation for academic and developmental successes. Developing positive behaviors during the early years is critical, because brain circuits are developing actively then.<sup>3</sup>
- Positive early learning experiences, at home and in other settings, can make a significant difference for children from the moment they're born.<sup>4</sup> In fact, 85% of the brain's development happens before kindergarten.<sup>5</sup>

Just as a solid foundation can support a house, the fundamental support of early learning makes a tremendous difference in the long run. It impacts not just how children do or behave in kindergarten, but whether they'll be reading well by third grade, succeeding in eighth grade or graduating high school. The skills we look for in workers – critical thinking, problem solving, working on teams – are all built on the foundation of those early years. On the other hand, chronic stressors in the early years<sup>6</sup> – like persistent poverty, poor health and nutrition, absent parents and homelessness – can dramatically weaken that foundation.<sup>7</sup>

### Achievement Gap Starts Before School

Many children enter school lacking the fundamental skills necessary to succeed. In particular, children of color and those from low-income families are more likely to enter school with fewer language, literacy, social and other skills needed to ensure school success, compared with more advantaged children.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, the arc of failure starts early. A child who starts behind falls even farther behind, long before school. Disparities in child outcomes are evident by nine months.<sup>9</sup>

That achievement gap widens in school. For every 50 children who don't learn to read in kindergarten, 44 of them will still have trouble in third grade.<sup>10</sup> These disparities exist across cognitive, social, behavioral and health spectrums. Children without reading skills by third grade are unlikely to graduate. Low grades and high absenteeism rates by third grade are predictors of high school dropouts.

### Early Learning Opportunities

One factor that undercuts a child's positive development (and contributes to disparate outcomes) is a lack of quality early learning experiences. The need for quality care and education is a common one across America. In 2007, 60% of mothers with children under three held a job, while 78% of mothers with children age six through 17 worked.<sup>12</sup>

About half of the nation's youngest children are cared for by family, friends and neighbors in informal care settings. The fact that a child isn't in regulated care doesn't mean the care is lacking, but too often these caregivers – especially grandparents – are isolated from formal and informal supports. Family, friend and neighbor caregivers often lack information about what children need to be ready for school.<sup>13</sup>

For many families, especially those with low incomes, the demand for affordable early care that promotes healthy development and early learning far exceeds the supply.<sup>14</sup>

In general, quality early learning experiences support long-term child development and are linked to higher vocabulary scores, math and language abilities and success in school. Negative impacts of low-quality care are more likely felt among children who are at increased risk.<sup>15</sup> Yet the children who need help often aren't getting it. Head Start and Early Head Start, federally funded comprehensive programs for families living at or below the federal poverty line, provide quality learning opportunities for pregnant women and children birth to age five. But currently, Head Start serves only 50% of eligible children and Early Head Start serves 3% of eligible families.

Unfortunately, cost remains a major obstacle to good, affordable child care.<sup>16</sup> While families below the poverty level are eligible for publicly funded child care assistance in all 50 states,<sup>17</sup> eligibility does not mean access – especially in today's economy. In 2009, 19 states had waiting lists for subsidized child care.<sup>18</sup> Many working families earn too much for subsidies but too little for good child care. A two-parent family with just one child earning \$36,620 could pay almost 25% of that income for full-time care of one infant in a child care center, and almost 20% for a preschooler.<sup>19</sup> This often leaves too little to cover basic living expenses.<sup>20</sup>

## Families

Parents are a child's first teacher, but they often underestimate their contribution to their children's school readiness. Families and others who care for young children understand that the early

years are important. Yet many don't know exactly what to do to encourage early learning, or feel they don't have time to do what it takes to prepare their child for school.

In parent focus groups conducted by United Way for the *Born Learning* parent engagement campaign ([www.BornLearning.org](http://www.BornLearning.org)), parents from all economic walks of life were surprised to learn that talking with kids everyday can mean the difference between a child having a vocabulary of 3,000 or 15,000 words by kindergarten.

## Language and Literacy

Wherever children are in the early years, their experiences contribute significantly to the language and literacy skills that drive success at school.<sup>21</sup> Children are building language skills even before they can speak. Parents with access to child development information may know that speaking with children in full sentences, using advanced words, telling stories and singing songs can help children build pre-literacy skills, but that's a rarity in low-wage families.

For example, children from low-income families do not develop (on average) the same vocabulary as their peers in middle-income families. One study showed that by age three, children from middle-income families know about 1,100 words, while children in low-income families know about 525 words or less.<sup>22</sup>

Children who enter school with poor language and communication skills often have a hard time catching up.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, children who enter school with untreated health conditions or social and emotional developmental concerns struggle to acquire language, communication and cognitive skills in classroom settings.<sup>24</sup>

Research shows that early grade reading mastery is one of the best predictors of children's success in school.<sup>25</sup> Early language and literacy development plays a key role in supporting learning experiences that are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates and enhanced productivity in adult life.<sup>26</sup>

## Return on Investment

As global competition demands for high workforce skills increases, the U.S. economy is producing fewer educated workers. “This is a major drag on our competitiveness,” says Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman. That’s why many of America’s top economic thinkers are calling for stronger support for early learning, saying that a strong Return on Investment (ROI) in early learning is especially strong for young, at-risk children. Heckman says investing in early education pays off, especially for young, poor children. The ROI includes higher graduation rates, better job skills, increased homeownership and less chance of criminal activities.<sup>27</sup> According to Heckman, “evidence from economics, sociology, and public policy suggests that... early interventions that partially remedy the effects of adverse early environments can reverse some of the damage done... and have a high economic return relative to other policies. Data shows that early childhood inter-

ventions are more effective than interventions that come later in life.”<sup>28</sup> Policymakers should invest in young children, because the ROI is stronger than in low-skill adults, Heckman says.

“Investment in human capital breeds not only economic success for those being educated, but also for the overall economy,” says Arthur J. Rolnick, Senior Vice President and Director of Research of the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis. “Early childhood development programs are rarely portrayed as economic development initiatives and... that is a mistake.”<sup>29</sup>

Viewed through any lens – economics, education, brain development or family support – it is clear that providing all children with a strong foundation of good early learning experiences in the first five years can be part of a strategy to build a stronger community and country.



# SCHOOL READINESS CHALLENGES

In order to help young children succeed in school – and graduate from high school – we must address several challenges, including:

1. Socioeconomic disparities.
2. Access to affordable, stimulating early learning opportunities.
3. Reaching families who are disconnected from traditional supports and services.
4. The availability of data about children’s strengths and vulnerabilities before and at kindergarten entrance.
5. Awareness about the importance of investments in the early years.

## CHALLENGE 1 Socioeconomic Disparities in School Readiness

The research is clear: compared with their more affluent peers, children from lower-wage households are much more likely to arrive at school without the critical skills necessary for school success. Low-income families are more likely to have parents with lower levels of education, and maternal education is one strong predictor of future student success.<sup>30</sup> Poverty also affects parents’ ability to meet their family’s basic needs, which further jeopardizes a child’s ability to have consistent paths to growth and development.<sup>31</sup>

On average, children in low-income families get less literacy and language support at home. For instance, children in higher-income families hear an average of twice as many words per hour as children living in poverty, which fuels their learning.

- Children living in poverty are less likely to attend any type of center-based early care and education program, are more likely to have trouble with their schoolwork and more likely to repeat grades in school.<sup>32,33</sup>
- Children living in poverty are significantly more likely to be in poor health and are less likely to receive adequate treatment for health conditions.<sup>34</sup> Health conditions can seriously impair cognitive skills and behavior.<sup>35</sup>

Numerous studies comparing the outcomes of preschool children from different socioeconomic backgrounds find large differences in cognitive skills in children as young as three or four years old.<sup>36</sup> A report by the Brookings Institution notes:

“[C]ompared with kindergarteners from families in the bottom fifth of the socioeconomic distribution (measured by a combination of parental education, occupation and income), children from the top fifth of all families are four times more likely to have a computer in the home, have three times as many books in the home, are read to more often, watch far less television and are more likely to visit museums or libraries. These differences in early environments contribute to large gaps in test scores, which show up at a very early age”.<sup>37</sup>

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, children in the lowest socioeconomic groups, on average, start school months behind their middle-class peers in pre-reading and pre-math skills. This gap almost triples when the poorest children are compared to the most affluent 20%.<sup>38</sup>

## CHALLENGE 2

### Access to Affordable and Engaging Early Learning Opportunities

Given the high percentage of families with working parents, the importance of quality, affordable and accessible early learning opportunities that appropriately supports early development and learning cannot be overstated. Such programs help families—especially low-wage families—find and keep work and prepare young children for school success. In today’s economy, access to child care could be the difference in keeping one’s job.

Employers want workers to be on the job, productive and focused – and access to quality, affordable care is part of the equation. Child care breakdowns are associated with parent-employee absenteeism, tardiness and reduced concentration. One study estimates child care-related absences cost employers three billion dollars a year. The average employee misses eight to nine days of work a year – and for many low-wage parents, that absence is directly linked to the lack of child care.<sup>39</sup>

#### High Cost of Programs

Cost is a critical factor when choosing child care arrangements. The high price of child care is a burden on household budgets, and families may have to choose lower quality options in order to make ends meet.<sup>40</sup>

Low-income working families whose children would benefit the most from quality child care are least able to afford it. A family with both parents working full-time at minimum wage earns just \$24,300 a year.<sup>41</sup> In fact, half of families with children under age six earn below 200% of the poverty line.<sup>42</sup> Full-day child care for one child, however, can easily cost up to \$15,900 a year.<sup>43</sup>

In 2008, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) found that 37 states and the District of Columbia reported that the average price of care for an infant in a center exceeded 10% of the median income for a two-parent family. In 12 states, the average price of care for a four-year-old in a center also exceeded

10% of the two-parent median income.<sup>44</sup> In the same report, NACCRRA also noted that care in an accredited center can cost over 30% more than in other places.

That data covers only regulated child care, but many of America’s youngest children are cared for by family, friends and neighbors. Often, those informal caregivers are not getting connected to resources and information as well as formal providers.<sup>45</sup>

#### Uneven Quality

The quality of care arrangements, whether in formal or informal care, especially for children spending many hours in care, is a key determinant to how well prepared children are for school. A study released by the University of North Carolina in 1999 found that “children in high quality child care demonstrated greater mathematical ability, greater thinking and attention skills and fewer behavioral problems than children in lower quality care. These differences held true for children from a range of family backgrounds, with particularly significant effects for lower-income children.”<sup>46</sup> Children in poor quality child care may also have delayed language and reading skills.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, there are more poor or mediocre quality programs for young children than high quality program options.<sup>48</sup> While most states have established their own quality standards for their pre-kindergarten and child care programs, they vary widely from state to state and community to community. Each state, for instance, determines its own pre-kindergarten eligibility criteria, guidelines for access, curriculum, teacher standards, class size and funding levels. Differences between states are dramatic.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, child care licensing regulations, which provide a floor below which children would be in danger, vary widely across states on a variety of dimensions, including: health and safety requirements, staffing ratios, qualifications of staff, materials and curricula being employed and the characteristics of facilities.<sup>50</sup> States also vary substantially in the degree to which they license and regulate family child care home providers.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, most state licensing standards do not come close to meeting expert recommendations for safe care. For instance, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends that a single caregiver be responsible for no more than four infants, four or five toddlers, or 10 preschool age children.<sup>52</sup> However, the Children's Defense Fund reports that only eight states mandate that licensed centers meet these standards.<sup>53</sup>

It's important to note that these statistics pertain only to licensed or regulated care. Nearly half of young children and the majority of babies (birth to three years) are cared for by family, friends and neighbors, or in other informal settings,<sup>54</sup> with less data available on these scenarios.<sup>55</sup>

### Access to Quality Programs for All Families

Across the country and in every state there are few high quality, affordable programs for low- and moderate-income (and even upper-income) families:

- Only one in six children eligible for federal child care assistance currently receives help.<sup>56</sup>
- In 2008, 19 states had waiting lists for child care subsidies.<sup>57</sup>
- Head Start serves only half of all eligible children and Early Head Start serves only 3% of eligible families.<sup>58</sup>
- In the 38 states that fund preschool, state pre-kindergarten programs serve only 25% of all four-year-olds and only 4% of all three-year-olds.<sup>59</sup> Twelve states have no state-funded pre-kindergarten programs.<sup>60</sup>

Additionally, families often face an array of programs that are uncoordinated and disconnected. This is true across systems—child care, pre-kindergarten, Head Start, home visitation and other community programs, as well as across ages—from birth to school-age.

Those who are able to find programs for their infants and toddlers often have difficulty finding quality programs for their three-year-olds; they are too old for infant and toddler programs but not old enough for pre-kindergarten. This lack of continuity in quality care can jeopardize gains made during the early years and prevent children from coming to school ready to succeed.<sup>61</sup>

### Lack of Continuity of Care

When babies' needs are met, they form secure attachments, creating a foundation for healthy growth and development in the early years and throughout childhood.<sup>62</sup> Studies show that young children who have secure attachments to their caregivers are more likely to play, explore and interact with others while in child care.<sup>63</sup> This relationship between infants and their child care providers is an important complement to the relationship between children and their families.

Many young children, however, face regular disruptions in out-of-home care. The combination of high turnover rates for providers, transitions in parental employment and housing and eligibility criteria for programs all contribute to these disruptions. And these disruptions often lead to interruptions in learning that can have effects for many years to come.<sup>64</sup> Due to the often hectic work schedules of many families and the lack of full day and/or non-traditional hour care, many young children spend time in more than one setting every day.

At the same time, research shows that when parental bonds are strong, or when children are connected to at least one loving, consistent adult, they are more likely to do well. The best early care programs also strengthen families and prevent abuse and neglect that can result from economic stress, lack of social connections, lack of knowledge about child development and lack of concrete support.

It is particularly challenging to ensure high quality early learning experiences for two groups of young children: infants and toddlers and children from immigrant families. These two groups of children often receive care from providers who have less formal training and operate outside of traditional support networks.

## CHALLENGE 3

### Difficulty Reaching and Supporting Informal and Immigrant Caregivers

#### Lack of Supports for Informal Caregivers

There are about 12 million children under age three living in the United States, and one in five lives in poverty.<sup>65</sup> Significant evidence warns us that without proper care and nurturing, infants and toddlers are at risk of long-term developmental delays.

Whether children are with their parents or in other care, it is important for families and caregivers to understand that children are born learning, to understand how children learn and to understand how to support the learning that's happening every day, wherever the child is. Yet parents and caregivers dramatically undervalue their role in school readiness – one in three incorrectly believes their loving interaction has little impact on their child's learning capacity.<sup>66</sup>

Correcting that misunderstanding is one of the underlying premises of United Way's *Born Learning* campaign, which provides national public service advertising, online parent resources (at [www.BornLearning.org](http://www.BornLearning.org)) and research-based parent education and community mobilization tools that 1200 state and local *Born Learning* campaigns are using.

Most young children spend some time in non-parental care, and the quality of child care settings for infants and toddlers is often much lower than for older children. Infants and toddlers with employed mothers spend an average of 25 hours per week in child care, and 39% are in child care for 35 hours or more each week.<sup>67</sup>

Data from the 2005 National Household Education Survey indicates that more than half of infants and toddlers from low-income households are cared for by family or friends. Family, friend and neighbor care (also called kith and kin, informal, unregulated and license exempt care) is a broad term that refers to care by extended family members, nannies, friends, neighbors and other unrelated adults, often without pay.

For the most part, this child care choice is embedded in relationships between caregivers and

parents that begin—especially for relatives—long before the child care starts and continues long after the child care ends. Many family, friend and neighbor caregivers intend only to care for their grandchildren, nieces or nephews or their close friends' children.<sup>68</sup> Because of the informal nature of this care, few providers are connected to training, resources or support. On top of that, most initiatives designed to improve the quality of child care focus on regulated providers (child care centers, preschools and family child care providers), leaving out informal caregivers.

At least two-thirds of family, friend and neighbor caregivers are grandparents, who are often isolated from community supports for parents and are not informed on current child development research. While there are many advantages of this informal care – stronger bonds with the children, lower child to adult ratios, good communication between parents and providers and support for flexible work hours for parents – communities must put the spotlight on supporting these caregivers as part of larger early care and education initiatives.<sup>69</sup>

#### Lack of Supports for Children from Immigrant Families

Children from immigrant families are the fastest growing group of children in the United States. Some 22% of all children under the age of six, or more than five million young children, are children of immigrants.<sup>70</sup>

According to a report by the Center for Law and Social Policy, “Children of immigrants are more likely than children of U.S.-born citizens to face economic hardships and significant barriers to healthy development, making them less ready to succeed in school and beyond.” They are also less likely to take part in early education programs, like pre-kindergarten. And they're more likely to be in family, friend and neighbor care, bringing to bear the issues raised previously about lack of access to resources or community supports.

Quality early learning has great potential to address issues of school readiness and English language acquisition, helping children of immigrants start school with more advanced English skills that increases their chances of success. Culturally



competent early learning opportunities may also ease children's and families' integration into American society and schools, while sustaining cultural ties and appreciation of diversity.

Immigrant families face barriers related to demographics, language, culture, immigration status, and, in too many instances, prejudice and discrimination. Each of these barriers must be addressed to ensure that children have access to early care opportunities that promote school readiness.

## CHALLENGE 4

### Availability Of Data About Children's Strengths and Vulnerabilities Before and at Kindergarten Entrance

While many states and communities are increasingly focused on school readiness as a key element of education success, there is no national school readiness measurement. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, approximately 27 states collect school readiness data on children entering kindergarten. The data are used to inform classroom instruction, school improvement and accountability and child screening and placement.<sup>76</sup>

Yet decision makers need concrete, quantifiable information to help inform decisions for public programs, policies and budget priorities. That's why United Way is working with UCLA's Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities to pilot the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a population-based measure of children's readiness. The EDI measures five areas of child development proven to affect school readiness:

- Physical health and well-being.
- Social competence.
- Emotional maturity.
- Language and cognitive development.
- Communication skills and general knowledge.

Maps are generated based on the EDI data that give local leaders a highly detailed profile of what is happening in their communities, highlighting neighborhoods where children are vulnerable as

well as areas needing greater attention. The EDI is not only valid and reliable as a measure of children's readiness; it has also been proven to have predictive validity up to fifth grade in language and literacy. (More details in Strategy 4.)

## CHALLENGE 5

### Public Awareness and Political Will About the Importance of the Early Years

Unfortunately, the time when children's brains are developing the fastest is when public focus and investment in early learning is at its lowest.

In order to ensure that every child arrives at the school door ready to succeed, both policymakers and parents need good information and useful tools.

As United Way and the Ad Council found in our *Born Learning*-related research, parents understand that the early years are important. Yet many don't know exactly what to do to encourage early learning. Across all socio-economic lines, too many parents don't realize that learning starts at birth and that children are learning in important ways *all the time*. Parents and families need information about how to encourage the development of language and literacy skills and to support social and emotional development, as well as strategies for supporting their children's learning on a daily basis.<sup>77</sup>

Parents need support from policymakers, and policymakers need the facts. To build political will for strategic investment in early care and education, policymakers and elected officials must be educated about the latest brain research and how it impacts the choices before them. They need support – and sometimes pressure – to allocate limited public resources wisely to support success in the early years and beyond.

The challenge is two-fold. First, leaders need to understand and act upon information that shows how prevention produces better outcomes than remediation, and that investments in young children make sense from a moral as well as an economic standpoint.<sup>78</sup> Second, leaders need good data to make sure that programs are using strategies and approaches that are effective—and that information is in short supply.

# EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL READINESS

Research and practice suggest a variety of approaches that states and communities can take to improve the odds that youth and children will start school ready to succeed. These approaches fall into five categories, each of which addresses one or more of the challenges identified earlier in this chapter:

1. Provide resources and supports for families and caregivers.
2. Improve the quality of early learning opportunities.
3. Provide quality age-appropriate books to children.
4. Build awareness of EDI as valid and reliable population-based measure of children's readiness for school.
5. Engage the public and educate policymakers about early learning.

## STRATEGY 1

### Provide Resources and Supports for Families and Caregivers

As the primary caregivers of young children, families play a key role in preparing their children for success in school. Yet, many families are unaware of the critical learning that takes place in the earliest months and years of life and the best ways to nurture early development. The following approaches can help families better prepare their children for success in school and life.

### Connect Parents and Families to Information, Resources and Supports

Many United Ways are using creative methods to connect families with information, such as evidence based home visiting programs (e.g. Nurse Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters); neighborhood-based “coffee hours” with grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren; and working with employers to provide *Born Learning* and local resource and referral materials to employees in the workplace. Linking early learning providers with quality supports and services is a win-win for United Ways and their corporate partners.

The **United Way of Greenville County** in South Carolina launched *Partners in Productivity*, bringing business leaders, early childhood experts, child care providers and community volunteers together to build family-friendly work environments and educate employees about identifying and securing high-quality child care.

Almost 12 years ago, community leaders in Eugene, OR were galvanized by a number of high profile, tragic child abuse cases and Lane County's ranking as one of the highest rates of child abuse in the state. This group of community leaders became the **United Way of Lane County's Success By 6<sup>®</sup>** Leadership Team, developing and executing strategies to educate the public, providing parents with information and creating a 24-hour help line. As a result, Lane County was the only county in Oregon with a five-year declining trend in child abuse rates, dropping to the middle of the pack. The group is now developing a model of the Harlem Children's Zone, leading the way on kindergarten assessment, continuing to elevate the issue of early learning in the community and honing in on literacy efforts. While the initial focus was child abuse prevention, some 4,000 parents and caregivers of children under six dial the hotline every year to get information, referrals and support on a wide variety of parenting concerns, including development, sleep and discipline.

Others are using 2-1-1 and local child care resource and referral agencies to help parents locate key resources such as well-baby care and immunizations, child care, parenting classes and more. Family Resource Centers, or “one-stop shops” in disadvantaged neighborhoods, can also help parents with human service support, job training, English Language Learning opportunities and family literacy.

Another important resource for supporting the education of young children is *Born Learning*. Created by United Way, *Born Learning* tools for parents and caregivers help turn everyday activities at home such as laundry, meals and bedtime into learning experiences. Educational materials for caregivers are available both in English and in Spanish. Evidence shows that this approach is working—15 million parents have been reached with advertising and materials, and 61% of parents who recalled seeing the ads reported doing more in everyday activities to support early learning.<sup>79</sup> To learn more about *Born Learning*, go to [www.bornlearning.org](http://www.bornlearning.org).

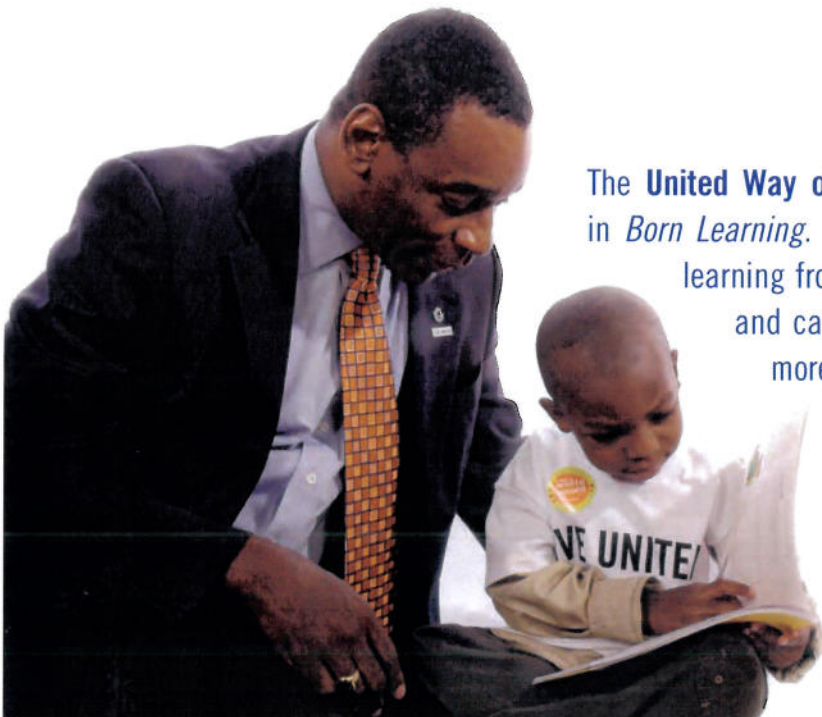
### Provide Support for Family, Friend and Neighbor Caregivers

Many states and communities are partnering with community organizations, such as libraries, faith communities or retailers to share child development tips with informal caregivers. Some cities are including family, friend and neighbor providers in their systems, and using strategies to engage providers outside the traditional system.

A growing number of states are giving informal providers the same positive development learning opportunities, materials and toys as regulated providers receive, in an attempt to improve environments and enhance learning. Other states are seeking ways to enable informal providers to participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program.<sup>80</sup> The state of Minnesota was the first in the nation to dedicate funds to community-wide partnerships that support informal caregivers.

But the most important strategy for reaching and helping providers is through partnerships with other groups that touch these caregivers – immigrant service centers, libraries, faith communities, shopping malls and other intermediary groups – equipping them with knowledge and resources to share.

United Way has created a number of tools to support family, friend and neighbor care, both in the *Born Learning* campaign and as part of other projects.



The **United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta** engaged faith leaders in *Born Learning*. Pastors talked about the importance of early learning from the pulpit; church programs included parent and caregiver education materials; churches provided more space for parent education classes. At the same time, African-American beauty shops partnered with United Way and others to provide mothers, grandmothers and aunts with information, resources and referrals to support school readiness.

## STRATEGY 2

### Improve the Quality of Early Learning Opportunities

Improving quality requires:

- Creating environments that ensure children have access to toys, books and spaces that promote learning.
- Engaging and supporting families as their child's first and most important teacher.
- Providing training and establishing licensing and monitoring systems that support qualified and well-compensated providers who are steeped in current research based child development practices and have on-going supports.
- Building systems to ensure programs that meet quality standards.

At the same time, communities must look beyond regulated child care to support family, friend and neighbor caregivers and the quality of their care as well. And this must be a focus of public-private partnerships, so that business, faith, schools and other leaders are part of a community-wide effort to improve early learning for young children.

### Improve Early Learning Environments

A young child's development is directly affected by his or her environment.<sup>81</sup> Much work has been done over the past two decades to articulate and design environments that allow children to explore and discover at their own pace.

Quality early learning environments include safe, healthy and inviting equipment and a variety of play materials, sufficient and uncluttered space for active play and places for quiet time. They also have books and other games to promote early literacy and numeracy, as well as social-emotional development.<sup>82</sup> Many of the requirements for quality early care environments are articulated in state early learning guidelines. For more information on these guidelines, see <http://www.nccic.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/goodstart/elgwebsites.html>.

United Ways should work with corporate, community and funded agency partners to provide support for parents and children wherever families are – where they play, pray, shop, work and live.

Early learning environments are not just in child care. Children learn wherever they are. In **Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama**, United Way has partnered with Publix grocery stores to adapt *Born Learning* materials to enrich the shopping experience for young children. Shoppers see signs and tips in the store, encouraging them to use the shopping trip to reinforce learning – like playing silly games about colors in the produce section. Weekly ads, store magazines and online newsletters reinforce the message with *Born Learning* tips, and Publix has worked with local media to elevate public service advertising that helps parents use everyday moments to reinforce learning.

### Improve Training and Qualifications of Early Learning Providers

Professional development programs and training for early learning providers helps ensure that those caring for our youngest children have the resources and skills to help young children love learning.

Many states have established qualifications, credentials and learning opportunities for early learning professionals as a key component of improving the quality of care. Some states have developed their own credentials or follow national standards. In some cases, professional development is linked to higher education degrees or certificates. Professional development can include pre-service as well as ongoing training and education.

The most ambitious systems involve career ladders that allow participants to continually improve their skills and knowledge and progress into supervisory and management roles.<sup>83</sup> The National Child Care Information Center contains information and resources on professional development systems in the United States.

- The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Project is a national model for improving the qualifications and training of providers. T.E.A.C.H. is a scholarship program for early childhood professionals. The project began in North Carolina in 1993 as part of Smart Start, the nation's first comprehensive early childhood education system, and now supports licenses in 21 other states. T.E.A.C.H. also maintains the Early Childhood® National Technical Assistance Center, which provides resources to programs and providers nationwide.<sup>84</sup>

## Support the Development and Implementation of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) are methods for assessing, improving and sharing information about the level of quality in early learning settings. A QRIS is systemic, addressing multiple aspects of early learning programs through a uniform approach that is available throughout a state.

QRIS usually have the following five common elements: standards; accountability; program and practitioner outreach and support; financing incentives specifically linked to compliance with quality standards; and parent education.<sup>85</sup> In 2009, 19 states had a QRIS with all five components.<sup>86</sup>

Quality rating improvement systems are sometimes considered a “report card” for early learning facilities. Most states and some communities have established such systems to help parents know what they are buying and use quality improvement resources for programs and teachers as incentives to continuously improve the quality of care. But in today’s fiscal crisis, many states are underfunding the improvement aspect. Simply imposing a ranking system without supports for program/provider improvement does not allow them to rise in the rankings.

United Way supports the QRIS model, and has resources on United Way Online, including *Stair Steps to Quality: A Guide for States and Communities Developing Quality Rating Systems* (2005). This guide is designed as a hands-on, practical planning tool for United Ways to use as they consider how to develop a new QRIS or review and improve an existing one.

## STRATEGY 3

### *Provide Quality, Age Appropriate Books to Children*

Building literacy and language skills early is essential for children to come to school with the skills required to succeed. Studies show that 88% of first graders who are below grade level in reading will continue to read below grade level in fourth grade.<sup>87</sup>

Access to quality, age-appropriate books is key to developing reading skills. Studies confirm that the number of books in the home directly predicts reading achievement. Children who grow up with books in their homes reached a higher level of education than those who did not. According to one study, having just 20 books in the home has a strong effect on educational attainment. The more books added to the home, the greater the benefit.<sup>88</sup>

Yet nearly two-thirds of low-income families have no books. Around 80% of the pre-schools and afterschool programs serving children in need do not have a single book for the children they serve. In some of the lowest-income neighborhoods in the country, there is only one book available for every 300 children.<sup>89</sup>

*“Access to books and educational material is the single biggest barrier to literacy development in the United States and beyond. If we can solve the problem of access, we will be well on the road to realizing educational parity – a goal which has eluded this country for generations.”*

Susan B. Neuman, Ph.D. University of Michigan, Ctr. for Improvement of Early Reading Achievement

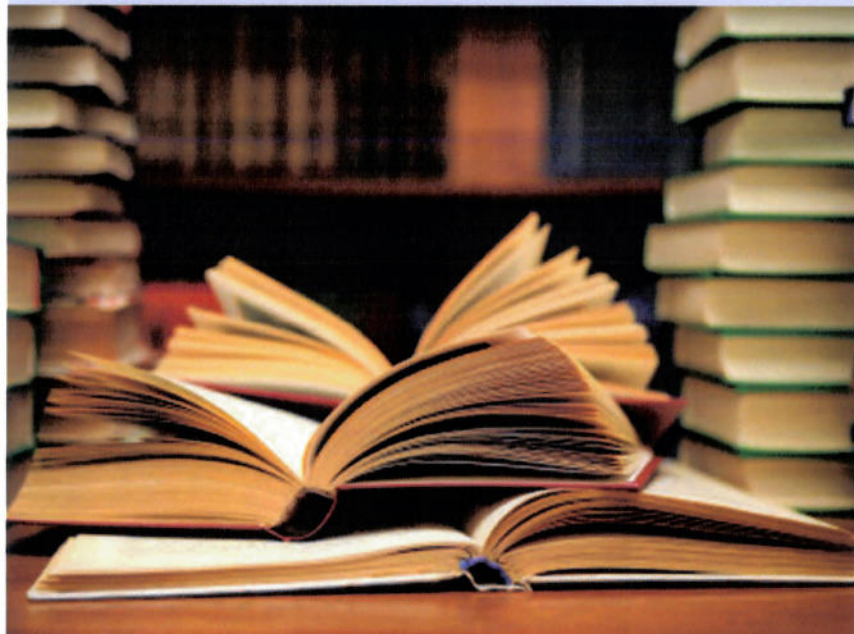
A number of efforts have focused—with some success—on getting books into the hands of parents and children and promoting regular parent-child book reading in low-income families.

- **First Book** ([www.firstbook.org](http://www.firstbook.org)) connects book publishers and community organizations to provide access to new books for children in need. So far, 80 million books have been donated to more than 25,000 programs or groups. First Book distributes books in three ways:
  - The First Book National Book Bank distributes free books to programs that serve at least 80% children from low-income families.
  - The First Book Marketplace is an online store selling discounted books and educational materials 50 - 90% off retail prices to programs that serve at least 50% children from low-income families.
  - First Book Advisory Boards make community level grants enabling programs that serve at least 80% children from low-income families to receive free books.

Evaluations find that “high interest in reading” triples among children who received new books from First Book, and 99.2% of programs that get First Book books are able to increase their literacy efforts and offer new curriculum activities, including parent engagement programs. First Book also improves literacy in the home: more than 70% of children who received books through First Book reported increased reading at home.

- **Raising a Reader** ([www.raisingareader.org](http://www.raisingareader.org)) works with at-risk families to encourage reading with young children every day. RAR provides high quality, multicultural-focused books on a weekly basis to families with children who often have limited exposure to books. It encourages parents to engage in a daily routine of “book cuddling” with their children from birth to age five to foster healthy brain development, parent-child bonding and early literacy skills. In 10 years, it has reached more than 800,000 children at 2,500 sites in 30 states.

**Dolly Parton's Imagination Library** ([www.imaginationlibrary.com](http://www.imaginationlibrary.com)) is seeing results. The program sends one book every month to each enrolled child until his or her fifth birthday. Since United Way and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library formed a partnership in 2009, more than 225 United Ways have launched local Imagination Library programs to get books to children, boost children's pre-literacy skills and help parents and caregivers nurture those skills as well. Many United Ways have used Imagination Library as an impact strategy that can be framed as an investment strategy, and many Women's Leadership Councils have adopted it.



In **Middletown, OH**, an evaluation by the Middletown Community Foundation found that 98% of participating low-income parents increased the frequency with which they read to their children. About 95% of low-income parents saw increases in their child's excitement and enthusiasm about books, and every single low-income parent said their child is more interested in books as a result. That benefit extends into school, as incoming kindergarteners who'd taken part in Middletown's Imagination Library for between one and nine months scored on average 4.2% higher than their peers on kindergarten entrance literacy assessments.

The **United Way of Berks County** in Reading, PA has incorporated Raising a Reader into its Nurse Family partnership program, helping parents boost their young children’s language and literacy skills from the beginning. Home visitors help parents learn how to promote an interest in books with their children, and teach them the importance of telling stories and reading with their children on a regular basis. United Way is partnering with 14 early care and education sites in the city of Reading, including Head Start classrooms, child care centers and home visitation programs to provide this program to approximately 1,000 children and their families.

- **Reach Out and Read** ([www.reachoutandread.org](http://www.reachoutandread.org)) partners with pediatricians to promote early literacy and school readiness in pediatric exam rooms nationwide by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud. The program has reached nearly four million families so far, and evaluations show participating children enter kindergarten better prepared to succeed, with larger vocabularies, stronger language skills and a six-month developmental edge over their peers.
- **Reading Is Fundamental** ([www.rif.org](http://www.rif.org)), the largest children’s literacy nonprofit in the U.S., delivers free books and literacy resources to children and families who need them most. A network of 400,000 volunteers work in schools, homeless shelters, churches, migrant centers, health clinics and community centers to distribute 15 million books, stage reading motivation activities and promote the importance of literacy in their communities.

Libraries are also changing the way they support low-income children and families. One promising model is **Family Place Libraries™** ([www.family-placelibraries.org](http://www.family-placelibraries.org)), a network of 300 libraries in 22 states that operate as community hubs for families with young children.<sup>91</sup> A Family Place Library offers a five-week parent/child workshop for toddlers and parents, involving local professionals and facilitating early intervention, and teaching parents strategies for healthy child development and early literacy. The library space is redesigned to be more welcoming, and books, toys, videos, music and other materials for babies, toddlers and parents are added.

## STRATEGY 4

### *Build Awareness about the Importance of Data on Children’s Readiness to Learn*

Decision makers need concrete, quantifiable information to help inform the decisions of community leaders, school administrators and policy makers regarding programs, policies and budget priorities. In most communities, data on the status of children is sorely lacking. When available, these data can show decision-makers exactly where the children who need help are—by census tract, neighborhood, school district or city. And seeing these data in light of resources that are or aren’t available helps inform decisions about how communities invest in future resources.

One innovative measurement tool is the **Early Development Instrument (EDI)**, a research-based population measure of children’s readiness to succeed. EDI provides schools and communities with an easy way to gather critical population-level information about young children—including health, safety and school readiness information—neighborhood by neighborhood.<sup>92</sup> By combining the EDI results with local data on resources and other key factors through a geo-mapping process, communities can “map” children’s status against various socioeconomic factors and neighborhood resources.

That’s why United Way is working with UCLA’s Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities to pilot the Early Development Instrument and is helping policymakers make research-based, data-driven decisions that will help improve community resources and supports for young children.

This proven tool (developed in Canada where it has been used for 10 years and has been used in Australia for two years) is now being piloted in 20 communities, including New Orleans, Louisiana; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Hattiesburg/Petal, Mississippi; and Los Angeles, California. These communities have signed up to test-drive a new, easier way of gathering critical information about young children — neighborhood by neighborhood. This new data can add value to planning and decision making for community services, helping policymakers see which neighborhoods need what kind of services to boost children’s school success.

Each year in the spring, kindergarten teachers fill out a questionnaire about each child's physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language skills, which research shows are foundational skills for success in school, work and life. Teachers are given time or stipends to encourage completion.

The data is not used to diagnose or screen children, but to tell a community what percentage of its children are vulnerable in each of the critical areas of child development.

Combining the EDI results with local data on resources and other key factors can paint a picture about the children's status and how that relates to socioeconomic factors. It can show decision makers exactly where the children are who need help, by census tract, neighborhood, school district or city.

**This means school and community leaders can determine exactly which children are behind and in which communities – and use that data to make decisions about community services.**

EDI data doesn't assess programs or services, but has been shown to have predictive validity up to fifth grade in language and literacy and helps inform how children in a given neighborhood are progressing on physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language skills.

Evaluations in Canada and Australia show that policy makers using EDI and other local data have been able to plan more effectively and make more informed decisions on community strategies, policies and levels of funding affecting disadvantaged children.

One evaluation in British Columbia found that school districts re-evaluated resource allocations based on EDI results, and ended up adding family support and literacy centers, and improving nutrition, dental, vision and hearing screening programs. In fact, the researcher reported that "many (school) districts confirmed that the hard data presented by the EDI gave them the courage to make decisions to respond."

That study found that "school districts have begun to embrace a new role and responsibility by examining developmental indicator data at school entry, by planning interventions in response

to the data, and by partnering with other agencies to serve the needs of young children and their families. While a number of districts had already begun to move in this direction, the EDI process and the resulting numerical data provided to school districts have played a significant role in establishing the need and the confidence to move forward."<sup>93</sup> For more information on United Way's national pilot with UCLA, contact [Elizabeth.Groginsky@unitedway.org](mailto:Elizabeth.Groginsky@unitedway.org).

## STRATEGY 5

### *Engage the Public and Educate Policymakers on Early Learning*

There are several emerging methods communities are using to educate the public and policymakers.

#### **Conduct Public Education Campaigns**

Too often, community leaders don't fully understand how important the first few years are to building a vibrant, prosperous community. Many United Ways have undertaken public awareness efforts to change this dynamic, putting children front and center in the debate. United Way's *Born Learning* public engagement campaign was designed to make it easy for United Ways and their partners to do just that.

*Born Learning* is the only national early learning public engagement campaign *specifically designed* to be adapted by local communities to support local efforts. The campaign structure is an unusual mix of national messaging (Ad Council public service advertising), educational materials that can be localized (vetted by experts), and a web site ([www.BornLearning.org](http://www.BornLearning.org)) with easy access to tools and expert community mobilization tips (provided by Families and Work Institute).

Too many awareness campaigns fizzle out, due to limited resources. PSAs may not get run because it's prohibitively expensive. Materials may not be based on the latest research, are not high-quality in appearance or are created without end users in mind. And unless it's a strategic part of a larger community mobilization plan, such campaigns eventually lose momentum.



With *Born Learning*, United Way carved out a different path, with a focus on long-term systemic change, supported by awareness, education and action tools for anyone who wants them. The campaign includes:

- Educational material that makes it simple and easy for parents, grandparents, informal caregivers and professional child care providers to find out about, understand and apply the latest research to help children come to school ready to succeed.
- A mobilization guide that helps any community's early learning efforts, providing tools, templates and training.
- A growing coalition of local, state and regional organizations – from non-profit, public and for-profit sectors and cultural institutions – working together to educate, persuade and galvanize community leaders and policymakers to provide what's needed for children's school readiness.

Our goal is to equip parents, caregivers, teachers, community advocates, service providers, civic leaders and decision makers across America to ensure quality early learning for young children.

For more information on *Born Learning*, contact [Mariana.Florit@unitedway.org](mailto:Mariana.Florit@unitedway.org).

## Implement System Building Efforts

These efforts, increasingly underway in states and communities across the United States, are an important way to weave together often disconnected programs and services for our youngest children. They enable communities to collect and share community-wide, statewide or even inter-state data with community members and policymakers to improve outcomes for all children.

Several notable system-building efforts follow:

- The **Birth to Five Policy Alliance** ([www.birthtofivepolicy.org](http://www.birthtofivepolicy.org)) is working to promote innovative and successful state policy ideas that shift the odds for very young children and narrow the achievement gap. The Birth to Five Policy Alliance invests in three strategies: strategic and broad-based leadership to build new champions for early childhood policy; state-based advocacy; and knowledge development and dissemination including research/policy analysis.
- The **BUILD Initiative** ([www.buildinitiative.org](http://www.buildinitiative.org)) is a multi-state partnership that helps states construct a seamless framework of policies that promote high quality services and incorporates what we know about brain development into best practices for care and learning. It supports state efforts to create comprehensive early childhood systems – coordinated, effective policies that address children's, physical and mental health, nutrition, early care and education, family support and parenting programs and services for children with special needs.
- The **Ready by 21 Partnership** ([www.forumfyi.org/readyby21](http://www.forumfyi.org/readyby21)) supports state and local leaders committed to ensuring that all young people are ready for college, work and life. By providing grants and technical assistance from a group of national partners, this partnership is working to improve outcomes across the age continuum. United Way is a signature partner.
- The **Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Initiative** ([www.state-eccs.org](http://www.state-eccs.org)) supports all 50 states and the territories in their efforts to build and integrate early childhood service systems. Project THRIVE at the National Center for Children in Poverty provides policy support to this initiative.
- The **ZERO TO THREE State Self-Assessment Checklist** from the National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families provides states with clear guidelines for building effective early childhood development systems. This checklist is available at: <http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/policy-toolkit/checklistsinglesmar5.pdf>.

# THE WAY FORWARD

One of the strongest roles United Ways play in making real community change is that of a mobilizing force, recruiting people with passion, expertise and resources to make a difference. In the case of early learning, United Ways are often the lead in galvanizing stakeholders to examine issues, develop strategies and execute action plans on the issues that matter most.

Some 80% of the United Way network supports early learning, but there is a great deal more that needs to be done – particularly around boosting literacy and providing books to children. Providing all children with a good start in the first few years is about more than school readiness. It's also a critical step toward improving graduation rates.

United Ways must scale up their early childhood work, connect it to kindergarten through twelfth grade, and in particular, bridge literacy efforts in kindergarten through third grade. Many national early childhood leaders – like the National Association for Education of Young Children – are now defining early childhood as birth to age eight, so it makes sense to look at early childhood and early grade reading as two parts of a whole strategy.

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