There are over 500,000 children in Indiana under age five. Every weekday, their parents and family caregivers wake up, they get themselves ready and orchestrate breakfast, getting dressed, packed, and out the door. In the nearly 70 percent of Hoosier families with young children where all adults in the household are in the workforce, a child will spend some or most of her day being cared for, educated by, and engaged by another adult.

Early childhood teachers, program directors, and other associated professionals wake up every day, as well, and prepare to take on this most important of tasks. Child care and early childhood programs are deeply woven into the fabric of Hoosier families and communities. They are an essential educational platform and economic support.

By 2020, Partnerships for Early Learners, a campaign of Early Learning Indiana, aims to ensure that 75 percent of children in early learning settings are in high-quality programs.

EVERY FAMILY WANTS THE BEST FOR THEIR CHILD

Finding a high-quality early learning opportunity is top of mind for families. Hoosier families want safe environments, with loving and trusted teachers, where they know their children are developing and learning and where they are welcomed. But accessing such opportunities is a challenge for most families.

We know that only 35 percent of children are served in high-quality settings—defined as Paths to QUALITY™ Levels 3 or 4 or nationally-accredited programs. Simply put, there are not enough high-quality settings for Hoosier kids. To compound the challenge, most families have to pay out-of-pocket and high-quality programs cost an average of $8,000 to $10,000 each year.

Meanwhile, 45 percent of families of early learners live at or near poverty and public funding is far too limited to meet the overwhelming demand from families; the state’s main child care wait list routinely tops several thousand families. Even families who do receive assistance with child care tuition struggle to find a good program. Of those children who receive a child care subsidy, fewer than one-third attend a high-quality program.

THE CHALLENGE IS STATEWIDE AND LOCAL

Early learning opportunities also vary greatly by geography. For far too many families who want high-quality programs, none are available in their communities. In other communities, excellent programs may offer too few seats to meet the local demand.

As we seek to transform this system, a mix of local, regional, and statewide partners must work in collaboration to address the range of challenges and opportunities for all of Indiana’s families.
There is good news to share. While families and communities have long struggled with how to make high-quality early learning more abundant and accessible, recently, Indiana has made great progress:

- A new state-funded pre-K program—On My Way Pre-K—is set to serve up to 2,000 children starting in August.
- Communities such as Bloomington, Columbus, Evansville, Fort Wayne, South Bend, and many others have made tremendous progress by leveraging local resources and by working in partnership.
- Hundreds of committed volunteers have recently been working through the Indiana Early Learning Advisory Committee to tackle big challenges in early learning, set higher standards and change their own communities for the better.
- The Governor and state agencies—such as the Office of Early Childhood and Out-of-School Learning and the Indiana Department of Education—have elevated early learning on their radar, drawing attention to these issues and targeting resources to young families.
- Public schools are becoming more and more engaged, offering early childhood programming and partnering with community-based agencies that most often care for their future scholars.

The opportunity to expand quality and access to Indiana’s early learners has never been greater.

Early Learning Indiana has been a trusted provider of high-quality child care and early childhood services for over 100 years. We serve over 1,200 children a year from diverse Indianapolis-area families and our results speak for themselves. We consistently operate at 90 percent enrollment, are a top employer of local early childhood talent, and our children outpace their peers on the state’s school readiness assessment—the ISTAR-KR. Thirty years ago we took on a broader mission—to improve early learning options for all Central Indiana children. We now support over 40,000 families a year through Child Care Answers.

In 2014, we took on the mandate to work statewide. Our statewide initiative—Partnerships for Early Learners—is a $20 million, five-year campaign funded by the Lilly Endowment. Recognizing the imperative to steward these resources effectively, we spent nine months charting a course to improve Indiana’s early learning landscape. Working with trusted state and national partners, we conducted over 800 interviews and surveys with local and national experts, families, early childhood programs and professionals, local coalitions, and diverse community stakeholders that care about and benefit from early learning, including business leaders. We went a step further, commissioning exhaustive research reviews and talking to leaders in other states that have improved their early childhood systems. We commissioned a needs assessment to better understand the hard data about Hoosier families and how well early learning programs are meeting their needs. Finally, we filtered all of this through our long-standing knowledge base and many partnership discussions with public and private actors.
A PLAN BUILT ON COLLABORATION

As we worked with a number of partners on developing strategies for Partnerships for Early Learners, one lesson came through most clearly—**the greatest progress for early learners and their families will come from working through partnership**. Families need to be engaged as their child’s best and first teacher. Teachers need to be better supported and to support one another. State and local agencies and community stakeholders need to partner across artificial boundaries. Funding needs to align to support high-quality practice. Employers need to buy in to the very real notion that the productivity of their workforce is dependent on their workers’ economic security and well-being. The catalytic power of making partnership a core—rather than optional—part of Indiana’s early childhood system cannot be underestimated and it will undergird everything Partnerships for Early Learners supports.

We also learned that “quality” is very broadly-defined. Orienting around the state’s Paths to QUALITY™ system focuses that intention, but we need to be working at all levels to drive the outcome that matters most to families and community stakeholders—child well-being and readiness for school and life. We learned that coaches who assist programs and assist teachers play a critical role in enhancing quality. Working with young children is a science and an art that requires expert support. We learned that creative partnerships are needed to create new high-quality classrooms for children—and that those new opportunities have to be affordable and sustainable for the future. Programs need better training in business practices and business models.

Finally, we affirmed what we’ve learned over our 100-plus year history—**the most important people in a child’s life are families and teachers, those closest to them, who spend the most time with them and who know them best**. Families need to be more welcomed and deeply engaged in their child’s early learning and in their transitions. We need to better support families, particularly those with challenged economic circumstances and limited English language. Teachers need to be praised for what they are—professionals—and held to high standards. They need viable pathways to higher education, better professional development opportunities and compensation and benefits that recognize their value and keep them in the classroom. They deserve the opportunity to make their passion a career that lasts a lifetime.

Our strategy plans lay out the specific strategies and goals that respond to these learnings in the areas of Quality Improvement, Capacity-Building, Workforce Development, Family Engagement, and Innovation and Leadership. It is an ambitious vision that can only be achieved through strategic, thoughtful, and sustained work with partners at all levels.

**OUR STRATEGIES**

**Quality Improvement**
Helping promising programs attain higher levels of quality, leading to better learning environments and positive child and family outcomes

**Capacity-Building**
Supporting the expansion, affordability, and sustainability of high-quality early childhood programs

**Family Engagement**
Enhancing efforts that support families when they make early childhood decisions and strengthening partnership between parents and teachers

**Workforce Development**
Expanding educational opportunities and helping programs and communities train and retain high-quality teachers

**Innovation & Leadership**
Cultivating collaborations that tackle the big challenges facing Indiana’s early learning landscape

CONNECT WITH PARTNERSHIPS FOR EARLY LEARNERS AT WWW.PARTNERSHIPSFOREARLYLEARNERS.ORG
Early Learning Indiana, formerly Day Nursery Association, is one of the largest and the most experienced nonprofit early childhood organization in Central Indiana. Eleven high-quality Day Early Learning centers that serve over 1,200 infants, toddlers and preschoolers are located in the Indianapolis area. Child Care Answers, Indiana’s largest child care resource and referral agency, provides impartial and expert child care referrals for parents, as well as training, coaching and shared services for early childhood professionals and providers in eight Indiana counties. Learn more at www.EarlyLearningIN.org.

**THIS WORK IS GUIDED BY THE FOLLOWING CORE PRINCIPLES:**

- **Build on existing infrastructure** that supports early learners and their families, such as existing scholarship programs and tools that rate the quality of early childhood options, such as the state’s Paths to QUALITY rating system and the CLASS assessment of program quality.

- **Deepen the work of critical partners** that already have relationships with child care providers, school systems, teachers and families, whether local United Way agencies, Indiana’s Association for the Education of Young Children or local child care resource and referral agencies.

- **Promote models or strategies that get results** and are supported by an evidence-base, so that limited public and private resources are well spent.

- **Create partnerships** between child cares, K-12 schools and school systems, Head Starts, parent engagement programs, pre- and post-natal providers, hospitals and others; we know that a child’s early learning is the responsibility of many people and organizations working together.

- **Measure our progress and hold ourselves accountable** for improving the quality of programs available and their accessibility across the state.

**WE CAN’T STOP LOOKING FORWARD**

If we achieve our goals, **75 percent of early learners in early childhood programs will be in a high-quality setting**. Over 1,000 new and affordable slots will be created and 300 professionals that work with young children—mostly teachers—will be better trained and compensated. Over 7,000 families will access clear and valuable opportunities to support their child. A set of innovative partnerships will demonstrate what is possible when partners come together to tackle the big challenges facing early learners.

But we can’t stop there. The Partnerships for Early Learners initiative is just a down-payment on a future where all young Hoosier children have the opportunity to access a high-quality early learning experience, families have a true choice of early learning opportunities and communities thrive as a result of robust and sustained public and private investments in young children.

We will start to pave that road through our investments, partnerships, leadership development, and advocacy. **We will help to create a system worthy and ready to receive more public funding. But it will be up to policymakers to act—and soon. Children and families across Indiana cannot wait.** They do their part everyday and disproportionately bear the cost of high-quality care, the burden of access and the often impossible challenge of balancing work and family obligations. It is time to for us to stand with them, stand up for them, and strengthen the fabric of Hoosier families and communities.

Early Learning Indiana, formerly Day Nursery Association, is one of the largest and the most experienced nonprofit early childhood organization in Central Indiana. Eleven high-quality Day Early Learning centers that serve over 1,200 infants, toddlers and preschoolers are located in the Indianapolis area. Child Care Answers, Indiana’s largest child care resource and referral agency, provides impartial and expert child care referrals for parents, as well as training, coaching and shared services for early childhood professionals and providers in eight Indiana counties. Learn more at www.EarlyLearningIN.org.