



# Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative

*Building nurturing communities of thriving children*

**A Research Report by Wilder Research for  
The Minnesota Initiative Foundations**

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### INTRODUCTION

The Minnesota Initiative Foundations (MIFs) jointly launched the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative in 2001. The MIFs are six independent, regional foundations serving the 80-county area of greater Minnesota. They are the Initiative Foundation, Northland Foundation, Northwest Minnesota Foundation, Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, Southwest Initiative Foundation, and West Central Initiative.

Before all the publicity about the potential long-term payoffs from investing in early childhood development, the MIFs were inspired and impelled by growing research evidence and awareness about the critical importance of early childhood experience on brain development (Gunnar, 1998; Hawley, 1998; Temple and Reynolds, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Brain development is the result of increasing and strengthening connections between billions of nerve cells in the brain. Electrochemical signals pass from one nerve cell to another via a small but vital gap called a synapse. This intricate biological process is facilitated by stimulation, exploration, and nurturance. Through experience and repetition in the early years, neural connections grow stronger and become hardwired. Thus healthy brain growth requires developmentally appropriate stimulation so that nerve cells can connect, strengthen, and hardwire. Children who have the opportunity to grow and thrive in developmentally appropriate environments have the advantage of optimal brain growth.

At present, the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative is comprised of individuals and organizations in 64 early childhood coalitions. In over 165 greater Minnesota communities, these coalitions have implemented more than 400 projects, programs, and activities to improve the well-being of young children. They are

also creating culture-specific early care and education approaches and interventions that are sensitive to the needs of diverse populations.

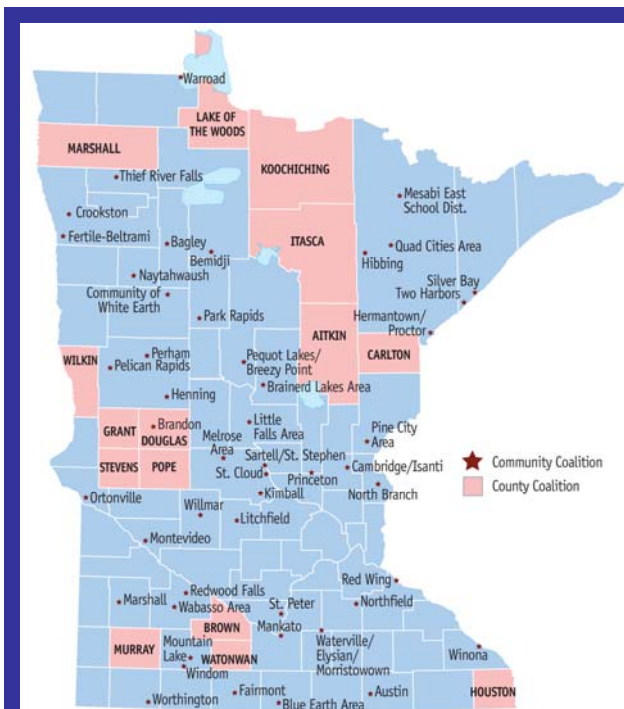
### *Theory of change*

The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative is grounded in the belief that young children need a nurturing community environment to thrive. Likewise, the MIFs also believe the best way to build thriving communities, now and in the future, is by supporting all young children so they have a healthy life of learning, achieving, and succeeding. The strength of a community and the success of its children are tightly interwoven.

The Initiative's early childhood coalitions use a common process to engage community members across all sectors in ensuring all young children have access to high quality early care and education. Just as a child's brain requires nurturing and stimulation to develop to its full capacity, a community requires nurturing and stimulation to become fully engaged in improving early care and education. Like the synapses that span gaps to form vital pathways in a young child's brain, the MIFs early childhood coalition-building process helps make those critical connections within communities.

To get started, the MIFs interview community members to determine perceptions of the availability and accessibility of resources for young children and families and hold public forums to discuss the realities of early care and education. Coalition members then work together to create community visions and develop local action plans.

Following this process, communities build awareness and address issues of local importance, key factors in catalyzing a community to action (Mattessich and Monsey, 1997). Moreover, the communities plan and implement strategies for strengthening local early care and education in such a way as to build



community ties in the process, producing results through greater community awareness and participation beyond the intended purpose of the strategies. The process itself creates strong bonds of trust among collaborative partners and between project staff and families. Community development is relationship building, connecting the dots between people and organizations, building on local assets to improve community ties and conditions.

While this community relationship-building approach attempts to change and improve early learning environments, cross-agency coordination, and community-level planning, it differs from the early learning systems building approach articulated by the Build Initiative and others (Coffman, Stover Wright, and Bruner, 2006; Stoney, Mitchell, and Warner, 2006). That systems change approach also involves governance structures to decategorize funding streams and deliver coordinated services seamlessly across departmental and jurisdictional boundaries.

### ***Components of a nurturing community***

As the MIF early childhood coalitions identified, planned, and implemented strategies, five components emerged as building blocks for a nurturing community. These are:

- Strong families
- Engaged community members

- Effective and coordinated early care and education
- Early learning opportunities to gain literacy skills and to develop cognitively, socially, emotionally and/or physically
- Ready schools

Working with Wilder Research, the MIFs categorized the community strategies implemented by coalitions into these five components. They then identified three to five strategies for each component that represent model or exemplary strategies from each of the six regions. In conversations with Wilder Research, key actors from community coalitions using the exemplary strategies featured in this report described their models, what they expected to achieve, factors that contributed to their success, and the assumptions or theories of change that undergird their strategies. In the following sections, Wilder Research summarizes and blends the results of these conversations to describe the exemplary strategies and the theory of change for each component and then summarizes some of the supporting research evidence. All the references are listed at the end of the report.

## **STRONG FAMILIES**

Strong families are key to creating a nurturing environment for children and contributing to their healthy development. All parents need information and support to be successful, and some must count on being part of a strong community to carry them through challenging times. The Initiative works to build trusting relationships and partnerships that support healthy choices and connect parents to resources.

### ***Exemplary strategies***

The Thief River Falls coalition's Family Advocate project and the Northfield coalition's Babies and Blankets program send professional visitors, such as nurses and social workers, to the homes of young children. These home visitors are trained to be supportive and accepting of family situations that may otherwise be met with disapproval or fear. Their role depends on the family's situation, but helping teen mothers return to finish high school and referring parents to substance abuse counseling are common examples.

The Early Childhood Dental Network, a regional initiative of the 10 coalitions in West Central Minnesota and the Redwood Falls Area coalition, build partnerships to promote strong and healthy families and to organize community-based events. The Early Childhood Dental Network, with more than 40 partners, provides information to parents and caregivers about the importance of early dental health and works with dental care providers to ensure that low income and geographically isolated children are able to access dental services. The Redwood Falls Area coalition organizes "big top" tent festivities to attract families with young children. Parents mingle and share information, and public health educators talk about making healthy choices, with topics ranging from protecting a child from too much sun to getting regular exercise. Another series of events organized by the coalition called Fathers Read Every Day (FRED) helps new dads develop parenting skills through reading aloud to their children. The Redwood Falls Area coalition reinforces good parenting by conducting "Random Acts of Good Parenting," in which community members offer parents praise and a free children's book whenever they witness an example of good parenting.

### ***Theory of change***

The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative believes that all parents need support but that some need additional help to overcome barriers. Accordingly, it uses a mix of approaches – home visits, community events, and strategic partnerships – to ensure that as many families as possible are given opportunities to benefit from their supports.

The Initiative values the primary role of families in the lives of young children and recognizes that changing situations for families require a thoughtful approach. It also believes that all families deserve respect and should be able to seek assistance on their terms. Most families are not in crisis situations. They simply want to interact with other parents, gain a greater understanding of their child's developmental stages, and access health services or other early child-hood offerings more conveniently. However, some families are in situations that can be traumatic for young children.



Accordingly, the Initiative unobtrusively provides appropriate types and levels of supports as they are needed. Acceptance of unmarried teen parents, parents suffering from mental illness, and parents who were previously homeless, for example, can unlock doors for some of the most isolated young children and parents. For families who are reluctant to seek or accept help, a trusting relationship is a bridge to community resources.

Strong families form the foundation for children's success, and being part of a supportive community can help parents maintain strong and healthy families. Honoring each family's strengths and aspirations is a vital part of the relationship-building necessary to support all families. Moreover, by supporting and strengthening all families, communities reap rewards, accumulating assets that mitigate risks and add to the human capital and health of Minnesota communities.

### ***Research evidence***

Family functioning is central to child development. The rate at which children develop and learn depends on their social surroundings and foremost on their families, the primary frame of reference for interpreting their world (Hayden et al., 1998).

Kathy Seitzinger Hepburn (2004), summarizing best practices in parent education, describes parents as

"first teachers" who are eager for information that will help them foster their children's growth and learning. Parents are more likely to take advantage of parent education opportunities if the events are conveniently scheduled, advertised in a way that clearly states the potential benefits for children, and avoid infringing on the privacy of participants (Spoth & Redmond, 1996). Fathers offer unique and positive influences to children's outcomes, but their involvement in parenting and in parent education opportunities is generally low, which suggests a need for parent education opportunities geared towards fathers that promote meaningful interactions with their children (Lewis & Lamb, 2003; Brown, 2000).

Home visiting improves access to family supports and parenting information, but it has exhibited mixed results when it comes to strengthening families and improving outcomes for children (Gomby et al., 1999). Factors associated with positive results for home visiting programs include connecting parents to a network of other parents and supports, cultural sensitivity, a positive and trusting parent-visitor relationship, and professional qualifications of the home visitor. (Layzer et al., 2001; Capse & Lopez, 2006).

## ENGAGED COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Children need advocates. Engaging community members in a child's early experiences plays a critical role in fostering a climate for success. It starts with informing and teaching people in the community about early childhood issues. Once people understand what children need to succeed – including early learning opportunities and parents with good jobs – they pitch in to improve conditions and outcomes for them.



## *Exemplary strategies*

The Princeton coalition created a variety of advocacy opportunities for their community. They organized community forums so voters could learn about the early childhood policy goals of local candidates. These listening sessions connected early care and education stakeholders with elected officials. Other efforts included helping parents ask their local school board to provide more early childhood education opportunities, raising awareness in faith communities about opportunities to improve outcomes for young children, and changing perceptions among some elected officials that parent education and family services infringe on the role of parents.

The Montevideo coalition uses the community engagement and visioning process as issues arise. For example, when a Federal reviewer visited the local Head Start program and declared it insufficient because it lacked outdoor play space, the coalition got to work. They brought together key stakeholders – ECFE, the local hospital, a state senator, and others – who not only addressed the play space, but developed a long-term vision for the program that included low-interest public financing, co-location of services, and better integration of the program with the surrounding community.

## *Theory of change*

The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative believes that the success of young children ensures our future collective prosperity. We must consider our youngest children to be valuable assets, and make investing in them a top priority for government and businesses. However, major community decisions – by both the public and private sectors – often overlook this critical constituency. Children can't vote or voice their views. In addition, when children's issues compete against special interest issues, they usually lose out.

Children must have a voice. The Initiative believes the best way to provide it is through community engagement and action. The Initiative brings together a broad array of community members and organizations to plan strategies and influence decisions around the needs of young children. The process has a compounding effect. When people start investing their time and skills to ensure all young children have opportunities to learn, they become determined to see their efforts pay off,

and so increase their commitment to achieving their goal. Moreover, collective planning and representative decision-making improves the quality of decisions because it reduces the risk of overlooking good ideas or alienating key parties.

Ultimately, involving all community sectors – parents, voters, businesses, funders, religious organizations, planners and policy makers – in supporting our youngest citizens and improving their outcomes is self-generating and will contribute to the future prosperity of greater Minnesota.

### ***Research evidence***

Schneider and Ingram (1993) have observed that children occupy a weak position of political power. Combining that lack of political power with a generally positive view of children held by public officials often results in "symbolic policies" that allow elected leaders to express their support for children and families without allocating resources proportional to their needs. The burden of allocating resources typically falls to local organizations, faith communities, and the private sector. However, as some economists argue, children are squarely in the public interest, which requires policies that recognize and reward the family role in generating human capital and that take into account the economic development potential of investing in children (Folbre, 1994; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003).

Hepburn (2004) and The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities (2007) make the case that programs and policies can be improved by empowering parents to be advocates and decision makers. Research by Slass (2003) describes how business, faith, and other leaders can be educated about the scientific evidence supporting early childhood interventions and their stake in policies that promote equitable outcomes for children. Further, Pierson (2000) describes how engaging parents and community members on behalf of young children can build momentum for early childhood policy change and long-term investment in the early years. Accordingly, parents should be encouraged to share their stories to successfully educate and engage these various community sectors and elected officials to act on behalf of children (Hepburn, 2004; Slass, 2003).

## **EFFECTIVE AND COORDINATED EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION**

In Minnesota, most children are in some type of child care setting before entering kindergarten. If we can ensure all parents have information about child development, child care options, and family support resources, and their children receive care that boosts their development and learning, more children will enter kindergarten developmentally ready, which leads to long-term school and life success. Early childhood professionals increase their community connections and their opportunities for service coordination when they work together to serve families. The whole community benefits from effective and coordinated early care and education.

### ***Exemplary strategies***

The Crookston's Partnering with Parents program wanted to make sure parents knew where to go for services. They pulled together piecemeal information and developed a web site and printed booklets that listed all local resources – including preschool, parenting classes, and children's health and development services – that parents of preschool-age children might find useful.

Overcoming barriers and filling gaps were goals of coalitions in Austin and Brandon. A program of the Austin coalition provides scholarships, parent education, and transportation for at-risk children who otherwise could not afford preschool education but do not qualify for Head Start. The "Look What I Can Do!" programs, implemented by the Pope County and Grant County coalitions, are collaborations of Public Health, Head Start, ECFE, and others, that worked together to streamline the developmental screening process for children from birth to age 3 by eliminating service duplication and connecting families to appropriate services.

To sustain early care and education opportunities and to support quality, the Carlton County coalition invested in training for child care professionals such as early childhood mental health, indicators of early childhood developmental progress, and the impact of electronic media on young children. The low or no cost training provides continuing education credits and professional networking opportunities. The trainings are also a way to reward and invigorate staff.

### ***Theory of change***

The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative believes that having comprehensive and accessible information, at or before the birth of their child, is essential for parents to meet their child's early care and education needs. It also believes that when communities recognize that school readiness starts early and includes supporting the whole family, they focus on prevention and early intervention and find ways to fill service gaps. Also, when communities have a clear picture of the services available to young families, they will use it as a tool to raise community awareness about children, identify service gaps, and set priorities for future action.

Ultimately, through banding together to produce the essential information, eliminate duplication, and fill the service gaps, early childhood professionals increase their own community connections, sense of mutual trust, and opportunities for service coordination.

If we want investments in early care and education to pay off, families must have information about their options and the ability to access them, and the options must be high quality. The Initiative believes that investing in child care training produces and sustains this quality of care while at the same time promoting staff retention, both of which contribute to positive outcomes for children and families.

### ***Research evidence***

Parents use a wide variety of sources in the community – including personal contacts, Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, schools, places of worship, and printed materials – to learn about early care and education options, but they desire better information for choosing the highest quality care for their children (Chase et al., 2005).

According to numerous studies on brain development and long-term child outcomes, when it comes to parents accessing information and other supports for their own and their children's well-being, the earlier the better (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). However, even though large public benefits and costs hinge on the occurrence and timing of early childhood developmental screenings for all children, a lack of coordination among the various entities that serve children and families, such as health care providers

and early education programs, allows many children to remain undiagnosed and untreated for preventable special education needs before they enter school (Pinto-Martin, 2005).

Good information about quality early care and education options is not enough for parents whose choices are limited by the high cost of child care, which is why scholarships and other financial aid strategies are necessary (Chase et al., 2005; Grunewald & Rolnick, 2006). Investing in training for child care providers can also improve access to early education if it raises the quality of care that low income children experience (Frede, 1995). Early childhood professionals are motivated to develop their early care and education skills for the sake of children, but the cost of training is often a barrier to professional development (Chase et al., 2007).

### **EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES**

The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative recognizes that children are born learning. However, some children miss out on early learning opportunities because parents lack information and/or access to programs. In addition, some child care providers need support and encouragement to embrace their role as educators. The Initiative promotes early learning opportunities in families and child care settings by empowering parents with information and by supporting child care providers to help children learn.

### ***Exemplary strategies***

Three strategies exemplify promoting early learning opportunities by empowering parents with information. The Early Childhood Screening: Parent Education Component is a regional project of the 10 Northeastern Minnesota coalitions, in partnership with 28 school districts. The purpose of this project is to engage and inform parents at early childhood screening visits. Parents receive a backpack containing early learning materials, a Getting School Ready in Minnesota guide, and are offered a chance to converse with a parent educator and watch a video about early learning activities. The Worthington coalition offers classes in Spanish through the local ECFE program. The classes use a curriculum called Parents Advocating for Student Success (PASS), which encourages immigrant parents to be active in their children's education before and

during the K-12 school years. The Movin' & Groovin' and Cookin' Up Some Fun program of Sartell-St. Stephen coalition brings parents together to cook healthy meals with their children. In the process children and parents learn about healthy eating habits and foods from different cultures, and parents have the opportunity to share parenting advice.

Two other coalition initiatives support child care providers to help children learn. In Bemidji, the Music and Child Care Partnership sends music instructors to child care centers and homes and holds community concerts marketed to preschool programs and community members. These activities promote early learning about music, dance and the arts and awareness in the community of the importance of the child care. The Pelican Rapids, Henning, and the Community of White Earth (part of the White Earth Indian Reservation) coalitions conduct monthly outreach visits to family, friend, and neighbor child care providers who are often isolated in remote areas. Providers receive training and materials, such as books for teaching and preserving the Ojibwe language, thus promoting positive self concepts as well as literacy skills.

### ***Theory of change***

The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative believes that children gain developmentally appropriate skills through nurturing interactions with parents and caregivers. The Initiative also believes that by promoting learning opportunities that address multiple and interconnected domains of development children will be prepared – socially, emotionally, and cognitively – when they enter school and throughout their lifetimes.

Initiative strategies emphasize the quality of their learning activities as important for promoting lasting change. Staff are trained to provide positive, non-authoritative experiences. They educate, encourage, and motivate parents and providers to embrace their roles as educators and to provide early learning opportunities for their children. Cultural competency is infused in the initiatives to welcome parents from all backgrounds, to empower underrepresented groups,



and to help ensure the content of the educational outreach is perceived as credible. They also attract and encourage participation in activities with music and food.

Finally, the Initiative believes that not all parents and child care providers have easy access to the information they desire on child development and how to provide high-quality early learning activities. Accordingly, community coalitions conduct outreach to share early learning information with parents and child care providers in order to increase the number of children who have the opportunity to reach their full potential. They also overcome barriers, such as remoteness of locations and parents' busy schedules, by going to where the children are, such as to early childhood screenings and child care sites.

Ultimately, the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative improves children's early learning by encouraging and equipping adults to plant the seeds of learning through everyday, relationship-based interactions with young children. Through convenient, positive, and hands-on experiences, the Initiative demonstrates how early learning opportunities can be easy, fun, and effective.



### ***Research evidence***

The early learning opportunities promoted by the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative are consistent with Minnesota's early learning standards, which are predicated on research that shows when children master developmental skills in multiple domains before kindergarten they are better prepared for instruction and positive relationships with peers and teachers, and, therefore, more likely to succeed in school (Minnesota Department of Education & Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2005).

Further, Thompson and Happold (2002) stress intellectual skills are not enough to be ready for school – motivation and social-emotional development, which depend to a large degree on nurturing relationships with adults, are also essential. As research by Hart and Risely (1995) has shown, toys and other materials are no substitute for a process by which seemingly ordinary interactions between children and adults result in extraordinary learning outcomes. Supporting and encouraging parents to engage in responsive interactions with their children has been shown to have a positive impact on child development, overall, and more so than interventions that bypass parents and focus more on instructing children to achieve specific developmental goals (Mahoney et al., 1998). As for child care provider interventions, research by Doherty and others (2006) found that intentionality and use of support services are positive predictors of quality child care, which lends research support to the practice of promoting early learning activities through outreach to child care sites.

### **READY SCHOOLS**

Adjusting to kindergarten can be difficult for some children, particularly if they have not had prior experience being with groups of children in structured settings or if their parents are not familiar with the school setting. The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative is working to ease the transition to kindergarten by building relationships between parents, early care and education providers, K-12 teachers, and schools and by promoting parent involvement.

### ***Exemplary strategies***

Several coalitions are implementing kindergarten transition initiatives. The Proctor/Hermantown coalition's Bridges to Kindergarten program, Brainerd Lakes Area coalition's Ready Set Go project, and Wagonwan County coalition's Kindergarten Transition Team ease the transition from preschool to kindergarten by involving parents in activities that prepare children; by helping parents and schools reach a common set of expectations and aspirations; and by coordinating and aligning otherwise detached aspects of child care, preschool, and kindergarten.

The Bridges program, designed by early childhood and K-12 educators, involves parents of 4-year-olds in activities to connect with schools a full year before school begins. Ready Set Go addresses the lack of consensus on the best way for children to learn by getting child care, preschool, and kindergarten teachers to work together. The Kindergarten Transition Team makes sure that curriculum and expectations are in sync by incorporating information and ideas from child care, preschool, and kindergarten teachers.

### ***Theory of change***

The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative believes that a smooth transition to kindergarten is important because school represents a new environment that can be a difficult adjustment for children, and having a difficult time adjusting to school may diminish their ability to learn. Not all preschoolers are accustomed to being a member of a group, spending long periods of time away from home, or being in a different culture, for example. Children who are accustomed to a school environment are better prepared to succeed in school. Since a positive and successful start to school is critical to later achievement, smoothing the transition to school will not only improve the quality of education all children receive, but also help close gaps in achievement between disadvantaged children and their peers.

The Initiative believes that children learn more when each stage of their instructional experiences flow smoothly and build sequentially upon earlier approaches, content, and learned skills. One of the barriers to a successful transition to school is misalignment between child care/pre-kindergarten

curriculums and kindergarten curriculums. The Initiative addresses this disconnect by coordinating discussions between early care and education providers and kindergarten teachers so children are able to gain the full benefits of instruction and other learning experiences. In addition to helping children learn more at the onset of their educational experiences, this alignment may also reduce or cancel some risk factors for low student achievement, such as socio-economic status, gender, race, and teacher effects.

Smoothing the transition to school depends to a large degree on parents, child care providers, and teachers working together to ensure children have a high quality educational experience. Accordingly, some Initiative activities promote positive and open working relationships among adults who nurture young children. These relationships set the stage for parental involvement from the outset, thus increasing the capacity of providers and teachers to work in partnership with parents and to communicate about children's development and learning. In the long run, when parents are more involved in their children's education and have better relationships with their children's teachers, children develop more confidence in themselves, have increased motivation to be successful, and perform better in school.

Ultimately, the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative improves children's educational experience by focusing on getting parents and children ready for school and schools ready for parents and children. By building relationships between parents and teachers and getting everyone on the same page, these strategies help make ready schools.

### ***Research evidence***

According to Mangione and Speth (1998), the most effective way to ease the transition from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten is to involve parents and work with families as partners through frequent and ongoing interactions before kindergarten entry. In addition Bohan-Baker and Little (2004) propose that schools should make greater strides to actively involve parents and families. Relationships are also important for children experiencing the pre-kindergarten to kindergarten transition. Mashburn and Pianta (2006) stress the importance of relationships and connecting teachers, schools, and child care

providers with parents in an effort to provide parents information about behavior, culture, and values that are appropriate for school. Mashburn and Pianta also assert that children model the behavior of their parents; therefore parents' relationships with teachers, schools, and child care providers are important.

Finally, Kreider (2002) suggests that parents who involve themselves in children's early education experiences develop trusting and lasting relationships with other parents and this involvement increases the likelihood that parents will be involved in their children's future educational experiences.

### **SUMMARY**

Like the wiring process in a young child's brain, the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative is transforming communities – relationship by relationship. Through an organic process carried out in communities throughout greater Minnesota to identify and plan strategies to ensure that all children thrive, five key components of a nurturing community emerged. Backed up by research evidence, these components are:

- **Strong families** – The Initiative works to build trusting relationships and partnerships that support healthy choices and connect parents to information and resources on their own terms.
- **Engaged community members** – Young children need advocates, and when people understand what children need to succeed, they pitch in to improve conditions and outcomes for them. Engagement tends to breed more engagement.
- **Effective and coordinated early care and education** – By coordinating efforts to produce essential information, eliminate duplication, and fill service gaps, early care and education professionals increase their own community connections, sense of mutual trust, and opportunities for service coordination.
- **Early learning opportunities** – The Initiative empowers parents with information and supports child care providers to help children gain literacy skills and to develop cognitively, socially, emotionally and/or physically.
- **Ready schools** – The Initiative eases the transition to kindergarten by building relationships between parents, teachers, and schools and by promoting parent involvement in their children's education.

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## Wilder Research

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