



# Making Early Learning a Priority in Indiana

With more families gaining access to high-quality child care, Early Learning Indiana gets closer to its vision.

**As a mother of three preschool children,** Sadie Worl can quickly name what guides her family’s child care decisions. “First priority is cost, especially with three kids,” says Worl, a special education teacher for Western Wayne Elementary School, located in Cambridge City, Ind., about 60 miles east of Indianapolis. Husband Logan Worl works as a freight supervisor with a supply chain management company.

After tallying the monthly cost of the average daycare—\$100 a week per child; more for infants, she arrived at a total of \$1,400 a month—an amount that would have put a substantial dent in their household budget.

“That’s a huge, huge price for us,” she says. “It was so stressful trying to think about, ‘How are we going to afford this?’ I have a job, my husband has a job, but that’s a lot. And we make enough money that we don’t qualify for any kind of assistance.”

Next on Worl’s list is accessibility. Since Cambridge City is a small town with a population of about 1,700, child care options are limited. Most families rely on a network of unlicensed providers who care for children in their homes, Worl says. Getting to a licensed child care center with openings in nearby Richmond, Indiana, would have required a 40-minute commute each day.

So, it was a big relief when the Worls learned that a new child care center was opening in Cambridge City with support from Early Learning Indiana, a statewide organization that works to strengthen early childhood education programs for infants, toddlers and preschoolers up to age 5 and is a leader in improving access to those programs. In 2019, Lilly Endowment approved a \$15 million grant to Early Learning Indiana to help it partner with child care programs, schools, community foundations and other organizations to expand high-quality early learning options, improve the skills of teachers and strengthen awareness statewide about the value of high-quality child care programs for children, families and communities.

An important part of Early Learning Indiana’s effort has been to help reduce the number of child care deserts—places where access to quality child care programs is so limited that there is no more than one child care seat for every three children. Child care deserts exist in each of Indiana’s 92 counties, and four out of every 10 children in Indiana live in a child care desert. In the state as a whole, more than 45 percent of children live in a child care desert, according to Early Learning Indiana. In 2019, it partnered with the Indiana University Business Research Center to study early learning and child care availability and capacity throughout Indiana.

Cambridge City was one of those child care deserts.

In 2020, Early Learning Indiana made grants to 13 organizations across the state to help their local communities increase child

care capacity, including a grant to the Wayne County Community Foundation. The foundation collaborated with Early Learning Indiana, Western Wayne School Corporation and the Richmond YMCA to establish the new Cambridge City YMCA Y-Care, an early learning program housed at Western Wayne Elementary School.

Maureen Weber, President and CEO of Early Learning Indiana, says that the recent addition of high-quality child care centers, like Cambridge City YMCA Y-Care, reflects efforts her organization has led with support from Endowment grants to improve the quality and availability of high-quality child care seats throughout Indiana.

“The work really started with an Endowment grant in 2014,” she says. “The key focus was to improve the quality of early learning programs and increase their capacity to serve more families. We undertook all sorts of initiatives, including efforts to support providers, improve curriculum and develop cohorts that allow individual providers to collaborate around activities to improve quality.”

● Sadie Worl enrolled her three children (opposite) in a new child care program in Cambridge City, Ind., supported by Early Learning Indiana, an organization led by Maureen Weber (right) working to improve early learning statewide.





Another focus has been educating stakeholders throughout Indiana about the attributes of high-quality child care, she says. A big part of that effort has been promoting Paths to QUALITY, Indiana's early learning quality rating and improvement system that was launched in 2007. Its development was based on research that indicates that high-quality early childhood programs prepare children for success in school, work and life.

Between 2015 and 2020, Early Learning Indiana helped expand the number of high-quality early learning providers by 335—more than half of the total statewide increase of such providers during that time. Also during those five years, efforts by Early Learning Indiana contributed to the creation of close to 3,000 seats in new and existing high-quality early learning providers. Early learning providers that have achieved Level 3 or 4 on Indiana's Paths to QUALITY rating system are considered to be high quality.

### Structured environment supports learning

Support from Early Learning Indiana has helped Cambridge City YMCA Y-Care get off to a strong start, according to Misty Hollis, executive director of the Richmond YMCA, which administers the

program. The strength, she says, is rooted in a structured learning environment that encourages the cognitive and physical development of young children and regularly keeps families informed of progress.

"A child's first teacher is always their parent, but we also want parents to have the freedom to make choices for the workforce," Hollis says. "If a parent is going to leave their child with a provider, the first choice should be a provider of quality education. You don't want a child to not be ready for school. The best way to reach those measurements—the milestones that research shows children should be reaching—is through a qualified child care provider."

While families in Cambridge City are recognizing the benefits of the new local early learning program, evidence of the value of these kinds of programs is far-reaching, according to Lori Connors-Tadros, senior research fellow for the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

Research indicates that high-quality programs help set the foundation in children for social and emotional intelligence, better health outcomes and even employment later in life, Connors-Tadros says. Also, studies have outlined the positive impact to society as a whole, including improved workforce productivity of parents because of a decrease in missed days related to lack of child care.



Decades of research show the importance of high-quality, early learning programs to health and development, especially for low-income children and children experiencing various risks and adversities, according to Connors-Tadros. She points to evidence-based research led by Rutgers colleague W. Steven Barnett, an economist who has advocated for universal access to high-quality early learning.

Senior co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers, Barnett maintains that the essential components of a high-quality program that results in lifelong benefits include:

- **Activities that facilitate children's social, emotional, moral and physical development**
- **Well-paid teachers who hold at least a bachelor's degree and who are supported through expert supervision and professional development**
- **Inclusion in a larger system that provides additional resources, such as support for children with disabilities or children from households where English is not the predominant language**
- **Small class sizes**
- **Age-appropriate introduction of language and literacy skills, numbers and math and science concepts, and arts and culture**

Despite significant research showing the benefits of high-quality early learning, federal and state funding of early learning programs has been sporadic and generally inadequate, leaving millions of children nationwide without access to high-quality early care and education options, according to Connors-Tadros. Efforts in Indiana, however, to raise awareness of the value of high-quality programs are making a difference for children, their families and local communities.

“Lilly Endowment, by investing in Early Learning Indiana, has helped build a model that identifies what is most important for an effective early childhood education program, like the training of teachers, high-quality curriculum and parental support,” she says.

Moving forward, according to Weber, Early Learning Indiana will continue its multi-faceted approach to ensure that high-quality early learning opportunities are available to all children. That means helping organizations in communities like Cambridge City come together to develop new programs and strengthen awareness among families, employers and non-profit groups about the importance of high-quality offerings; continuing to help providers improve their standing in the Paths to QUALITY rating system; and working with higher education institutions and other stakeholders to attract, prepare and retain early learning teachers and administrators and help them obtain credentials in early childhood education.

## Economies of scale enable more resources for children

And there are new efforts on the horizon. One such effort is Stronger Together, a grantmaking initiative through which Early Learning Indiana is helping communities launch shared “service hubs.” Hubs can be designed to help providers build economies of scale in human resources, IT support and other office functions so they can focus more on providing high-quality care to children.

In addition, Early Learning Indiana is developing a digital platform to give families and providers real-time information about seat availability in local communities. The technology also will provide families with a rubric of what to look for when choosing an early learning program that best fits their needs.

Weber says she is hopeful that through ongoing collaborative initiatives and support from both the public and private sectors, Indiana will continue to make progress in overcoming its challenges to provide high-quality early learning programs statewide.

“About 10 years ago, these issues felt absolutely immovable. Now, while they are still challenging, we have lots of evidence to show that we can grow capacity and improve quality when we undertake focused efforts,” Weber says. “There’s such a hopefulness to this work as a result of the contributions that the Endowment has made to help support it.

“It’s really spurred and catalyzed not just our work but a tremendous amount of work across the state among individuals, foundations, United Ways, and others who weren’t really in the conversation prior to the Endowment’s substantial investment in making early learning a priority,” she says.

- Misty Hollis (opposite) helps administer the YMCA Y-Care program in Cambridge City, Ind., which along with IU Health Day Early Learning in Indianapolis (below) is supported by Early Learning Indiana.







# Ascend Plays Matchmaker Between Job Openings and Available Talent

Ascend's high-tech and high-touch matchmaking connects job openings with available talent

**Idriss Bah needed a job.** He'd graduated from Ivy Tech Community College in Indianapolis in 2018 with an associate degree and was getting ready to continue his education studying informatics at Indiana University in Bloomington.

Ivy Tech recommended several ways for him to find work. The one Bah chose was Ascend Indiana. Using a combination of online algorithms and personal assistance, Ascend matched him with a digital marketing firm called Hanapin Marketing, where he landed a position as an IT assistant.

Then, in fall 2019, when he needed an internship to fulfill his course requirements from IU's Luddy School of Informatics, Computer, and Engineering, Bah went back to Ascend. This time, he was connected with enFocus, a non-profit based in South Bend, Indiana. He landed not only the internship but a two-year fellowship.

"Informatics is a vast field. There are so many things you can do with technology and data," says Bah, who came to the United States from Sierra Leone with his family when he was about 4. "Ascend's ability to narrow that down and almost curate for what I'm looking for and am interested in is incredible."

Ascend, which is an initiative of the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership, launched its services in November 2017 with a mission to work with schools, employers and prospective employees to close the gap between open jobs and available talent. To do so, it developed three solutions. The Ascend Network provides a software platform that invites applicants to build their profile and then seeks to match them with employers. Ascend Services connects employers that have a common, recurring need for a specific kind of talent—nurses, for example—with schools that can develop the

talent to fill those positions. And Ascend's research arm educates policymakers on how to best respond to a changing economy.

What Ascend did for Idriss Bah, it has now done for more than 1,500 people in a little more than three years. By the time the \$12.75 million Lilly Endowment grant to support the charitable and educational aspects of Ascend ends in December 2022, Ascend expects to have placed at least 2,500 students and other job seekers into gainful employment in Indiana. Of those, 35 percent will come from communities that are often underrepresented in higher education. It also anticipates having 1,200 employers participating in its network and plans to meet with more than 8,000 screened candidates to ensure they are better prepared for the job market.

## Expanding Scope to Help Workers Displaced by COVID-19



And now, because of COVID-19, Ascend is providing services for displaced workers. New software will enable colleges, community-based organizations and workforce investment boards to provide case management to individuals who register through Ascend.

“We see Ascend's work as a critically important social innovation bringing together technological innovation with

the spirit of a non-profit that aims to ensure people, irrespective of their background, are able to succeed and find employment,” says Ascend cofounder, President and CEO Jason Kloth.

Ascend's work has caught the attention of the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, a research arm of the Brookings Institution, the Washington, D.C.-based public policy organization.

In a report called State of Renewal, which came out in February 2021 and focused largely on the state's economy during the pandemic, Brookings praised Ascend as “a flexible, scalable, Hoosier-built tool for improving worker transitions.”

Robert Maxim, a research associate, says Brookings began looking at Ascend as part of a larger examination of Indiana's economy. He noted that one of the challenges Indiana faces is that only 42 percent of the jobs in Indiana met Brookings' definition of good jobs, as measured by salaries, benefits and other criteria.

“One thing Ascend's done that impressed us is they played an important role in signaling the importance of good jobs for Indiana's recovery,” he says. “That was a major theme of our report. Ascend made sure that the jobs they were connecting workers to paid at least \$13 an hour. That type of commitment from employers in general but also workforce intermediaries is going to be important to ensure that Indiana's recovery is on a sustainable trajectory not only for the state's economic growth but also workers' well-being.”

## A Way to Level the Playing Field

Ascend began to take shape when Kloth was deputy mayor of the city of Indianapolis, a position he held from 2012 to 2015. His focus was on education and workforce development. In that role, he wondered: How do we more effectively align the education of individuals in our community with good jobs, and how do we do that in a way that's fair for people irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds?

- Ascend Indiana, under the leadership of Jason Kloth (left), connects college students and recent graduates to careers with Indiana companies.
- Idriss Bah works in IT at enFocus, a South Bend, Ind., non-profit organization (opposite left).
- Ascend helps colleges and universities in Indiana, including the University of Indianapolis, strengthen career preparation efforts (below).





In conversations with businesses looking to come to or expand in Indianapolis, he noted that they were looking for more than tax incentives—they wanted a skilled workforce. Initially, Kloth and his Ascend cofounders Stephanie Bothun and David L. Johnson, the president and CEO of the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership, raised \$855,000 in early funding and assembled a steering committee that included corporate executives and university presidents and chancellors to identify issues and potential solutions.

By 2016, Ascend had lined up \$9.7 million in funding, including \$5 million from the Endowment. It took another year for Ascend to design, build and populate the Ascend network with employers and job seekers and connect with college and university partners.

As Ascend has grown, much of what it provides can be done online, though unlike commercial sites, there will continue to be case managers providing education and personalized support.

“No other system blends those two components across everything from students looking for apprenticeships coming out of high school

managers with her to schools to sell the company to prospective employees and interns and try to do as many interviews as possible. That proved to be highly labor intensive. Ascend came to them and says, ‘Let us be an extension of Roche. Let’s leverage technology.’

As a result, Roche now is in contact with the higher education institutions it wants to target. Ascend has helped Roche spread the word about the company and Ascend “is able to glean information about candidates and use their technology and their algorithms to make great matches,” Boyle says.

For summer 2021, Ascend helped Roche sign up more than 70 interns from 30 schools. “No way would we have been able to get to 30 schools or more in the amount of time they were able to help us. And they were able to target schools we never would have been able to target, and so our diversity statistics are going up just the way that we want them. In the past, maybe our summer intern classes used to be about a third of diverse candidates. Now they’re nearing half.”

University of Indianapolis President Rob Manuel was another of



to college students looking for internships or jobs to dislocated workers trying to find their way back into employment following COVID,” Kloth says.

## Reaching More College Students, More Efficiently

Roche Diagnostics was one of the first companies to work with Ascend. Bridget Boyle, head of people and culture, says Roche needed help reaching as many colleges and universities as possible to help promote Roche as an attractive option for job-seeking college students. It also accessed Ascend to help screen candidates for summer internships, its two-year rotational program for recent college graduates and for direct-hire positions like technicians.

“They help us cast a much wider net to a lot of schools that we wouldn’t normally have the capacity to reach,” she says.

Prior to Ascend, Roche’s college recruiter would bring a team of

Ascend’s early partners. Under his leadership, one of the school’s goals has been to create degree programs that feed the workforce need while also producing students who graduate with jobs and careers.

“Our relationship with Ascend helps the University of Indianapolis to extend our services and the social capital of our students to more corporate relationships and employment opportunities than we would be able to do ourselves,” he explained.

When the university received a \$1 million Endowment grant to create the Professional Edge Center—its new version of career services—it worked with Ascend.

● University of Indianapolis President Rob Manuel and Bridget Boyle, an executive at Roche Diagnostics in Indianapolis, say Ascend is helping develop the college-to-career pipeline in Indiana.

“The Endowment’s grant enabled us to reimagine our traditional career services and create a program centered on helping students develop human, social and cultural capital,” says Manuel. “Using the Ascend model, we are better able to connect our students in more meaningful ways to a broader array of job opportunities and corporations.”

Just as Roche had been unable on its own to reach all the schools it wanted, UIndy lacked the ability to connect with as many employers as it would have liked. Ascend solved that problem.

One successful aspect of their partnership has been connecting UIndy and Community Hospital. The hospital operates health and physical therapy clinics in the UIndy Health Pavilion, and students in health professional programs get clinical placements there as part of their education. Because of the proximity, they’re also able to do joint research with faculty and students.

“Thanks to Ascend’s intermediary work between Community and the competitive bidding process, we were able to build new connections with Community, including a customized educational program for students in the nursing field that paves the way for advancement,” Manuel says.

## An Unexpected Opportunity

Idriss Bah, who aspires to become a chief information officer, never expected his career to start in the non-profit world. But he’s happy that Ascend connected him with enFocus, whose focus is on talent attraction and retention in the South Bend-Elkhart region. He’s getting professional experience and enjoying the opportunity to try out a new place to live after so many years in Indianapolis and Bloomington.

He doesn’t know what will happen after the summer of 2022 when his fellowship ends or what kind of job he’ll pursue.

“I’m not sure where I’m going to be, but I’m working on it,” he says. “And I’m going to reactivate my Ascend account in the near future so I can start prepping for it.”

- Nursing students at the University of Indianapolis train on campus for careers in healthcare.

