



# 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.

