

# Early Childhood Strategic Plan for Worcester



*Building a community where every child thrives!*

## Early Childhood Strategic Planning Work Group



**Together For Kids  
Coalition**

**June 2019**

The Together for Kids (TFK) Coalition is a collaboration of early childhood champions with a mission to promote the social-emotional well being and general health of young children and families throughout Greater Worcester.

Our members include individuals and representatives of early childhood service-providing agencies, parents/guardians, health care providers, human service organizations, community leaders, representatives of religious and business institutions, school and university personnel, local and state government representatives and other interested members.

TFK Coalition is grateful for the financial support of **Worcester Division of Public Health, City of Worcester, the Greater Worcester Community Foundation, and Edward Street Child Services** and the time, energy and thoughtfulness of a large group of community members in the creation of this plan.

It comes down to a simple idea-*when the youngest among us do well, we all do better.*



The value of a healthy start cannot be overestimated. Decades of research on human development indicate that solid investment in the earliest ages and stages of a child’s life is the most proactive, efficient and effective way to support a lifetime of well being. As any builder

Cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are inextricably intertwined throughout the life course...Emotional well being and social competence provide a strong foundation for emerging cognitive abilities, and together they are the bricks and mortar of brain architecture. The emotional and physical health, social skills, and cognitive-linguistic capacities that emerge in the early years are all important for success in school, the workplace, and in the larger community.

**Key Concepts in Brain Architecture**

The Center for the Developing Child, Harvard University

knows, the foundation determines the strength and durability of the structure. The same is true for early childhood development. Early experiences lay down the foundation for the brain architecture that will later determine a child’s learning, behavior and health.

How do we ensure that every child in our community has a strong

foundation for a lifetime of growth and development? The good news is we know the essential building blocks for a strong foundation, and many of those building blocks exist in our community. At the same time, we have serious gaps in resources and capacity when measured against our real needs.

Ensuring each child is supported with the right resources at the right time requires a comprehensive and responsive system of care. Within this comprehensive system, special

All infants and toddlers need access to high-quality, affordable early care and education, health and mental health, and family support services. Programs and services that address these areas are critical; however, they are only as strong as the infrastructure that supports them... To support the healthy development of all children, states and communities must provide comprehensive, coordinated, well-funded systems of high-quality, prenatal-to-age-8 services that foster success in school and life.

**Early Childhood Systems - Zero to Three**

attention must be paid to those children who have experienced trauma and toxic stress.

The science is clear; early childhood trauma is at the core of many long term, seemingly intractable problems – economic and health disparities affecting people of color, exploding child abuse and neglect complaints, and ever expanding health care costs, to name a few. Long term research on Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs and a growing understanding of the social determinants of health tell us that poverty and systemic inequities across many of our major institutions lead to poor outcomes for families and subsequently for communities.



Toxic stress impacts us all; not just the infants, children and families exposed to trauma, although they most certainly bear the brunt of the pain. Toxic stress costs us all; in health care, criminal justice, education and workforce costs almost too big to fathom. Large cracks in our common welfare are evidenced when employers, large and small, can't find qualified staff to hire. The problem even has national

security implications: military leaders have expressed serious concern about their ability to recruit and keep qualified service men and women. These challenges impact many layers of our common life, from community well being to national defense.

Early childhood environments are essential. We need to invest our efforts before the damage of toxic stress takes place. We need major investment in the early years as a primary strategy, not an after thought. Only then, and over time, will we start to save on costly interventions after the damage is done. It is only a question of when we pay and how much we pay; it is never a question of whether we pay. The longer we wait, the more preventable suffering for individuals, families and society goes unheeded, the more costly it becomes.

The building blocks of early childhood development:

Mastery over self (physically, cognitively and emotionally)

Developing trusting relationships  
Understanding and navigating the environment

Exposure to toxic stress impacts the laying of these blocks, undermining their stability.

It is far more challenging to develop self efficacy and confidence or build trust in an unstable, unpredictable environment.

At all levels, nationally, in the Commonwealth and in our community, we are facing a burgeoning child care crisis. Early education and care centers are increasingly growing dim and dark as providers leave the field. At the same time, more and more families need access to high quality affordable care for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. The early education and care workforce is shrinking due to converging pressures: the physical and emotional demands of the work itself, and a critical tension between the required levels of education and credentialing

and extremely low compensation. A stubborn lack of sufficient high quality, affordable care is now amplified by a shortage of qualified professionals to fill early education and care positions as they are created or become vacant. As a result, a system that has been inadequate for years is now losing critical capacity.

The early education and care crisis greatly impairs our ability to provide environments that ensure our children have a strong foundation for a healthy and productive life. Why? Because early education and care environments are the places that, in collaboration with the child's



family or caregivers, provide the essential elements for the foundation, brain architecture and relationships so central to healthy development.

We understand that this is a massive shift and that it will take sustained commitment and political will. At the same time; the early years must be the focus of our efforts if our goal is lasting sustainable change. If we do not invest in

children and families from the very beginning; all our future investments are undermined.

It is with this sense of urgency and purpose that the strategic planning working group set about the creation of the following plan. We identified four principles guide our work:

**1. Children's success is everyone's job.** Ensuring all young children thrive creates ripple effects throughout a community's economic well being. It has benefits today in parent and caregiver job success and productivity, and over time in supporting our future workforce development needs. Business leaders are beginning to understand as the CEO and Board Chair of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce noted in a recent editorial in the Worcester Telegram and Gazette<sup>1</sup>. They see the links between readiness for kindergarten, academic achievement and career readiness. Ensuring every child enters school ready to learn strengthens the foundation of our future workforce. This workforce is key to the health and vibrancy of our collective future.



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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.telegram.com/opinion/20180708/as-i-see-it-three-elements-to-boost-workforce-development-and-economy>



## 2. There is no time to wait.

According to the Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University: *“In the first few years of life, more than 1 million new neural connections form every second...the connections that form early provide either a strong or weak foundation for the connections that form later.”* There are concrete evidence based strategies we can employ right now and into the future to support the development of a strong foundation for all of our children.



## 3. Early childhood is critical to health equity.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s 2018 report of the same title describes the root causes for disparities; *“Poverty limits childrens’ and families’ options for healthy living conditions. Poverty can limit where children live, and can lead to exposure to unhealthy conditions in the home, such as lead or mold—and in the community, such*

*as air pollution or lack of healthy food options.... Sustained poverty and racism can create chronic stress in children and parents. So-called toxic stress can derail healthy physical, cognitive, and social emotional development.”* Interventions must address individual and family as well as systemic and structural barriers and challenges. If we reduce systemic barriers that create disparities from the start, we impact health over a lifetime.

## 4. The Return on Investment (ROI) is significant.

There is a substantial and growing body of research that shows that resources invested now will return tremendous economic benefits over a lifetime. As Nobel Laureate James J. Heckman puts it in the **Heckman Equation:** *High quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment—a rate substantially higher than the 7-10% return previously established for preschool programs serving 3- to 4-year-olds.”* These returns are realized through better outcomes in education, health, social behaviors and employment.



## By the Numbers

Here in Worcester, the challenge is significant and increasing. A close look at the available data reveals that many Worcester families carry an unequal burden of toxic stress:

- Our family poverty rate is 22%; almost 2X the state as a whole. Among children, 31%.<sup>2</sup>
- For families of color the family poverty rate is even higher; for African American families, 22.7%, for families of two or more races, 33.5%; for Latino families, 37.2%.<sup>3</sup>
- Over half of Worcester’s renters pay more than 30% of their income for housing.<sup>4</sup>
- 80% of Worcester kindergarteners are classified as “high need.”<sup>5</sup>
- 56% of Worcester kindergarteners begin school with no preschool experience. (vs. 30% statewide)
- Rate of NAS (opioid withdrawal in newborns) in Worcester, doubled since 2012.

### Addressing Inequity- why we focus on disparities

Local data reveals that while Worcester is on an upswing, we are not bringing everyone along in our growth and prosperity. Gaps in academic, economic and health outcomes exist that impact African American and Latino families at much higher rates. These disparities must be addressed or they will continue to impact our progress as a community. Local data provides a current picture of who is in highest need in our community, and where our efforts must be focused for greatest impact.

High quality early education and care (EEC) has been demonstrated to make a difference for children exposed to toxic stress and their families. However, Worcester’s total licensed EEC capacity for children under age five is 4,654. Worcester has a population of 7,185 children under five whose caretaker must work outside the home. This leaves over 2500 children under five in families that are on their own in arranging care for their infants and young children.

To compound the issue, trends in state support for EEC are moving in the wrong direction. In FY2018, state investment declined by \$381,000 from the prior year. For those who must pay out of pocket the prospects are daunting. Infant care in Worcester County costs \$16,500 annually (36% of median household income). For 4 year olds the situation is not much better, at \$12,300 (27% of median). Even among more affluent families, the cost is crippling. So, what do families do? In 2016, Worcester Community Connections Coalition of YOU Inc. released their findings from a parent survey seeking to identify their childcare needs. Of the 438 participants,

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey 5 year Estimates. Worcester. City.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance 2017 Point in Time

<sup>5</sup> MDESE School Districts Profile-2018

197 were parenting children aged 0-5; all respondents identified as low income with 61% earning under \$30K a year. A few quotes from the study bring the Worcester parent



experience to life:

- “Right now my mom watches her. If she’s in the hospital, I have to find friends or miss work.”
- “I have to stay home with my children, and not work, it’s not financially worth it.”
- “I wish there was assistance for the people like me who are in the middle. Where I make too much money for some things but still struggle and live paycheck to paycheck.”

In spite of significant challenges, these families persevere to create a workable childcare plan for their children. This shows real resilience in the face of daunting systemic barriers and is important to recognize. However, we must not allow this resilience to allow us to be complacent. For many of these families, a variety of adults (grandparents, other relatives, friends), serve as primary caregivers for their children. Many are disconnected from the early education and care system and as a result may not know the community resources available to them; everything from toddler play groups to early intervention services. Lack of awareness can result in lack of access to the early education and care services that build protection against the negative impact of toxic stress.

**Our Vision: Every parent, family and caregiver has what they need to ensure their child’s healthy development from prenatal through age eight.**

### Our Theory of CHANGE

#### IF every family has

- Access to work at liveable wage jobs that enable them to support a family
- Access to safe affordable homes, quality affordable food, effective transportation
- Access to affordable high quality early education and care and preschool
- Access to primary preventative care, healthy development knowledge, support as a parent



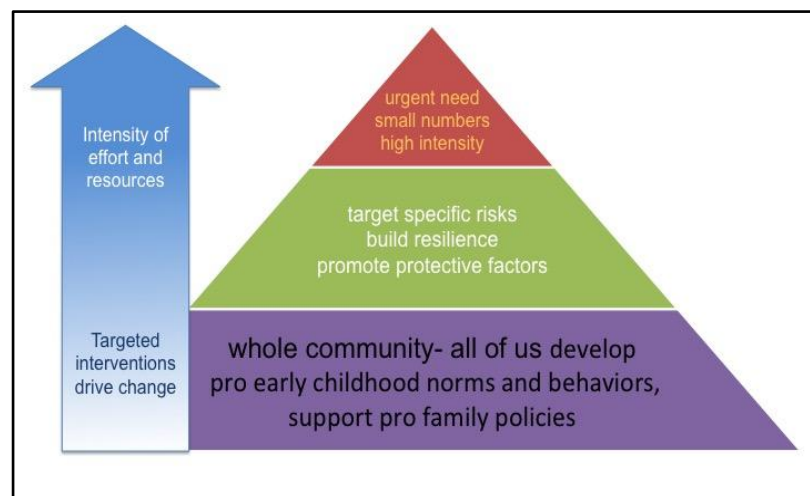
**THEN** Parents and caregivers of children prenatal to age eight are completely able and ready to provide the environment needed to raise healthy young people.

Worcester has many important building blocks in place that provide a strong foundation for this plan. Our first focus will be to fully assess our current assets against existing needs and disparities. We will work to align and network these assets to improve access, promote authentic family engagement and build champions for the work ahead.

Our plan will focus on these five areas in order to develop a sustainable comprehensive response to families with children prenatal through age eight:

1. Accessible, affordable, non stigmatizing parenting education and family support and health (including behavioral health) services that make family life easier
2. Access to high quality affordable early education and care for all Worcester children and families
3. Family resilience and community connection for families experiencing toxic stress and trauma
4. Advocacy opportunities (in partnership with others) for livable wage jobs, safe affordable housing, access to nutritious food and efficient transportation
5. Coordination of services and supports, including the development and tracking of indicators and benchmarks to measure progress and inform future planning.

Our comprehensive plan spans a continuum from basic to complex. We recognize that all parents and caregivers need access to healthy child development information and support. A substantial issue for families across the economic spectrum is access to affordable high quality early education and care. Many families in Worcester face a variety of factors that put them at risk for greater exposure



to toxic stress and trauma. They struggle with trying to balance the cost of early education and care with low paying jobs and other essentials (housing, health care, food, transportation). Some Worcester families experience multigenerational poverty and the resulting toxic stress and trauma. This untreated trauma contributes to disparities in health, education and economic stability. In order to make real sustained impact we need investment that aligns and deepens across universal, risk-specific and high intensity interventions that are appropriately resourced and form a comprehensive, coordinated system.

**All families** with children (prenatal through age eight) need a community that:

- Recognizes the importance of the earliest years as the foundation of a healthy life and community and treasures young children as their most essential future investment



- Invests in organizations, programs and places that support young children and their families reach their full potential
- Implements a high quality, affordable early education and care mixed delivery system (prenatal to age eight) that meets the needs of our diverse families
- Provides a continuum of care and resources that support healthy bodies and healthy minds for all community members

**Families facing specific risks** need intentional focused support:

- A safety net that provides basic needs support without stigma and shame
- A real path forward to greater self sufficiency (education/training, access to affordable high quality early education and care, livable wage jobs)
- Free, high quality, culturally responsive and low threshold home and community based support for early childhood development (pop up playgroups, libraries, park activities, parent support networks)
- A community committed to understanding the factors that put some families at greater risk and a will to mitigate those factors

**Families currently experiencing toxic stress** and trauma have unique and complex needs that require access to a coordinated response by networked community supports:

- A proactive response by community navigators who assist families with what they need today, tomorrow and over time.
- Effective trauma informed resources and restorative practices that match the needs of those in our community most impacted by trauma
- A highly responsive and communicative network of providers to address each family's unique health, education and care needs
- A strong recovery community that supports healthy, post trauma, community engagement and leadership



Having identified the comprehensive set of solutions required to ensure that all Worcester children have what they need to thrive, the planning group then established five strategic goals, each with initial two year objectives. We have also articulated aspirational five year outcomes to provide a clear compass point on the horizon.

## Our Proposed Plan

**Goal One:** Maximize the effectiveness of existing systems and supports through alignment and coordination, deep and respectful engagement of families and network building among providers, families and other concerned parties.

In two years we will:

- Understand and track the flow of resources for young children and families in and out of Worcester.
- Expand authentic opportunities for families to engage actively and meaningfully in their children's healthy development and education.
- Engage local stakeholders in discussion of best fit interventions; zero in on strategies to address gaps and expand options.
- Support evidence based trauma informed responses throughout the local system of care.
- Create a comprehensive community model that outlines strategies, results and resources to align programs and services across a continuum of solutions.

**Goal Two:** Engage the business community and government as partners in supporting early childhood well being.

In two years we will:

- Support active and vocal champions and leaders from across the community; including the chamber of commerce, government, faith and education, as they express the value of ensuring every child in our community has a strong foundation.
- Articulate and promote the financial and social returns on investment in early childhood to all who have the opportunity to contribute.



**Goal Three:** Change community norms so that everyone understands the value of investment in early childhood.

In two years we will:

- Have an active popular movement in support of children's well being that includes social media presence; traditional public relations & communications; what-you-can-do and how-you-can-help campaigns; tips for reaching out to parents and families.
- Participate in continued community based activities and events that deepen community member's understanding of the science of child development, ACEs, resilience and promising practices in the field.

**Goal Four:** Organize locally and partner with local, state and national champions to address the crisis in high quality affordable early education and care and infant and early childhood mental health services.

In two years we will:

- Raise awareness of the growing crisis in early education and care.
- Promote helpful policies and resist policy changes that negatively impact early childhood resources and services.
- Connect with and support early education and care and infant and early childhood mental health advocacy efforts at state and federal levels.

**Goal Five:** Develop a Worcester based robust data monitoring and evaluation system to ensure we stay data informed and accountable.

In two years we will:

- Develop, track and document indicators of child well-being, availability of resources, obstacles to progress, and persistent/emerging disparities.

**As a result of this work and continued commitment to early childhood development, in five years we will achieve the following outcomes:**

1. Worcester has a robust data system that tracks outcomes for families with young children (prenatal to age eight), resources in and out of the community and organization and program impact.
2. Through advocacy, Worcester will have substantially more federal, state and local government funding and other policy supports for the mixed delivery system and its workforce.
3. Substantial increase in access to quality of education and comprehensive services across the Prenatal to 3rd Grade continuum for young children and their families.
4. Measurable increase in the supply of quality behavioral health services for young children and their families.
5. Measurable reduction in health disparities affecting young children.

The Together for Kids Coalition strategic planning workgroup would like to thank everyone who has had input into the development of this plan.<sup>6</sup> We are fortified by the passion and commitment of so many in our community who understand the importance of early childhood well being and are working in myriad ways to support young children and their families. We hope to broaden that circle so everyone understands their role in supporting early childhood development.

We have a lot of work to do, and **there is no time to wait!**

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<sup>6</sup> See the next page for a summary of the planning process and list of planning group members

## Summary of TFK Coalition Early Childhood Strategic Planning Process

This document is the result of a year long process initiated by the Together For Kids Coalition (TFK) and the Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH) System of Care (SOC) initiative. The members of the TFK Coalition Strategic Planning Work Group are:

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Recognizing our history is an important component of our forward movement. We would like to acknowledge that many in our community have long been concerned with early childhood matters. Worcester has an experienced and talented early education and care provider mixed delivery system, and higher education institutions that provide professional development for early childhood development, education and care, and committed individuals from across a broad spectrum of the community who understand the importance of early childhood development.

Over the past decade, multiple efforts have been made to capture Worcester’s sizeable assets and identify gaps and racial, socio-economic and ethnic disparities impacting families with young children in our community. Each of these efforts has been an important and helpful step forward in the development of a comprehensive plan to ensure Worcester’s families with young children succeed. In the past two years, we have seen a groundswell of community interest in children’s well being and a desire to work together to improve our efforts here in our community. At the heart of all of these efforts were partners or collaborators from the Together for Kids Coalition.

Over the summer of 2018, Together for Kids Coalition, in close collaboration with Worcester’s Division of Public Health’s System of Care initiative initiated the development of a community wide strategic plan to ensure every young child has what they need to thrive. The planning group met faithfully almost every week for a year. We held two community sessions and one educational event to gather community input and review of our planning process and draft plan. We engaged a broad variety of community members; from parents and caregivers to

community leadership; over 60 people provided input to our developing plan. We brought in national expert Dr. Jayne Singer, Brazelton Touchpoints Center to talk with us about building protective factors for families of young children. We recognized key leaders in our community including Commissioner of Health and Human Services, Dr. Mattie Castiel, Kate Sharry from the Worcester Chamber of Commerce, Chris O’Keeffe, from the Greater Worcester Community Foundation and Tim Garvin of the United Way of Central MA. We engaged a group of Clark University graduate students to assist the completion of our developing needs and assets assessment.

In the fall of 2018 and into early 2019, we brought all this extensive information together with research on evidence based strategies and community processes. The group then entered a quieter phase to craft this plan. With a solid draft in hand, we vetted our plan with a few key community members and heeded their recommendations. We are now disseminating our work broadly. We hope you will join our forward progress. We welcome your thoughts, ideas and energy. Please share this document with other interested parties.

You can reach us at: [tfkcoalition@greaterworcester.org](mailto:tfkcoalition@greaterworcester.org)

Visit our Website: <http://www.greaterworcester.org/tfkcoalition>

Like and follow us on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/Worcester-Together-For-Kids-Coalition-1048498895333771/>

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