STRENGTHENING THE GRID



2023 Progress Report



Introduction

When it comes to improving the lives of children, it's natural to look for ways to meet their immediate needs – from essentials like food and clothing to items such as books and toys that are not only enjoyable but also beneficial for their learning and development.

What's more challenging to tackle are the systemic reasons why some children do not have access to these resources and what can be done to ensure all children have a strong start to life, even before they are



Across Arkansas, there are already programs and practices designed to help children, starting from birth, achieve their full educational and health potential, including physical, mental, and oral health. Unfortunately, the resources families need are often unevenly distributed, making it difficult for them to access these critical health, family, education, and community supports.

Excel by Eight Team



Angela Duran
Executive Director
Excel by Eight



La Shawn Grimes Conway County Project Consultant Excel by Eight

born.



Jessi Rice Woods Communities Director Excel by Eight



Sanci Richardson Communities Manager Excel by Eight

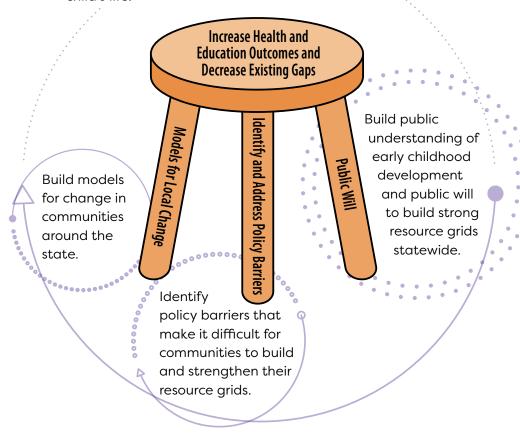


Tori Scott Communities Manager Excel by Eight



Excel by Eight is committed to increasing children's health and education outcomes by partnering with our local E8 communities, promoting the E8 Foundations' policy work, and building public support around the importance of the earliest years of a child's life. We describe our network's collaborative approach as a "three-legged stool":

- We invest in and partner with local communities across the state.
- We advocate for policy change at the state level.
- We build public will around the importance of the earliest years of a child's life.





Anna Strong
Executive Director
Arkansas Chapter
of the American
Academy
of Pediatrics



Beth Tody Sevier County Regional Consultant Excel by Eight



Jamie Ward President Arkansas Association for Infant Mental Health



Adena White Communications Director Excel by Eight



Alison Williams Coalition Director Excel by Eight

Our Mission

Excel by Eight partners with families and communities to improve health and education outcomes for Arkansas children prenatal to age eight.

Our Vision

Arkansas is a state where all children have a strong start to reach their full potential.

Strong Communities

Parents, educators, health professionals, and other community members identify gaps in their resource grids and develop strategies for improving child outcomes. When communities are fully plugged in, development outcomes improve.

Our Commitments

Excel by Eight is a network committed to...

Strong Families

Parents and caregivers are a child's first teachers and benefit from support in navigating the challenges and opportunities of parenting. Experiences begin at home but can also be provided through effective programs and policies that help all families.

A Strong Start

We acknowledge that every child in Arkansas deserves a strong start, but not every child starts in the same place. A strong start means education and health outcomes are not determined by barriers related to age, disability, gender, income, race/ethnicity, geography, or community resources.

Advocacy

We cultivate advocates for policies that promote advancements in children's health and education, ensuring a strong foundation for every child.

Data-Informed Decisions

We use data and research to inform our policy agenda, work with communities to identify areas of need, and evaluate the impact of our programs.

Early Brain Development

The brain develops faster from birth to age three than at any other period in life, building the foundation for future learning, behavior, and health.

Partnerships

Families, communities, businesses, and policymakers play a vital role in ensuring a strong start is available for every child.

Long-Term Impact

We aim to create lasting, positive change for families and communities. By focusing on the early years, we can help children develop the foundational skills and abilities they need to thrive throughout their lives.

We also recognize that a well-educated, skilled, and healthy workforce is essential for economic growth and prosperity. Early childhood development and strong families are key to building a capable and productive workforce for the future.

Resource Grid

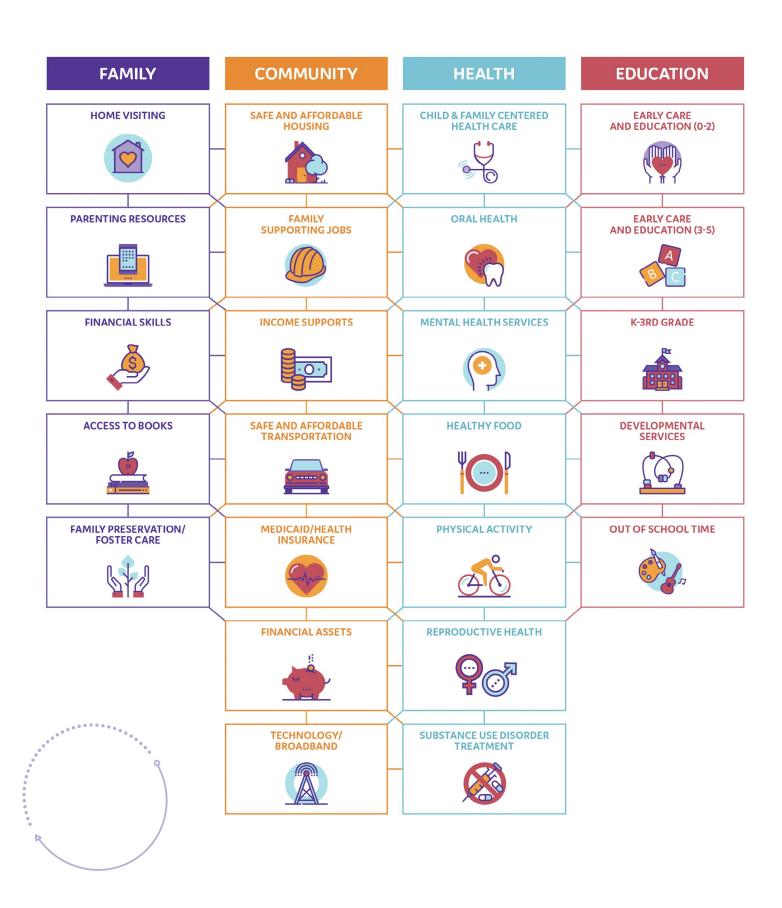
The array of resources children and families need operates like a power grid. Some parts may be incomplete

or malfunctioning, or the connections may be frayed or broken

altogether.

Resources such as highquality learning opportunities, healthy food, physical and mental health services, safe housing, and supportive relationships help children reach their full potential. An unreliable or patchy flow of resources can result in a range of developmental delays, with long-lasting consequences for children's health and well-being. When all families and communities are equally plugged in, children have what they need to thrive.







Excel by Eight Foundations

The Excel by Eight Foundations
Collaborative engaged in a yearlong planning process to review and update our policy agenda. We kicked off our planning process in November 2022 with a daylong summit that convened members of the Excel by Eight Foundations Collaborative, the group that helps us develop and implement our policy agenda to improve health and education outcomes for infants and toddlers.

In February 2023, we began the nine-month stakeholder input process that involved more than two dozen one-on-one interviews followed by four surveys, 10 virtual focus groups, and seven inperson focus groups.

The feedback from more than 500 parents, child care providers, home visitors, HealthySteps pediatricians and specialists, as well as doulas and other birth workers shaped the goals and recommendations developed by our four working groups – Early Childhood Education, Healthy Beginnings, Maternal Health, and Supported Families/Home Visiting.

These goals and recommendations, which you will find listed throughout this report, will inform the Excel by Eight Foundations Collaborative's priorities for the next several years.

By the Numbers: The E8 Foundations Planning Process

- 26 one-on-one interviews
- 192 responses to the parent and family survey (Families must currently have infants and toddlers.)
- 125 responses to the child care provider survey (Providers must be serving infants and toddlers.)
- 89 responses to the employer survey
- 17 focus groups
 - Hispanic families pregnant and new mothers (four focus groups)
 - Pregnant women and new moms living in the Delta (two focus groups)
 - Child care providers
 - HealthySteps pediatricians
 - Family advisors
 - Marshallese families pregnant and new mothers
 - Family child care providers
 - HealthySteps specialists
 - Families enrolled in home visiting
 - Families enrolled in HealthySteps
 - Home visitors
 - Birth workers (two focus groups)

Healthy Beginnings

Sustainability of HealthySteps through Public Funding

HealthySteps is a textbook case of philanthropic investment in a demonstration effort leading to sustainability with public funding.

The Arkansas Children's Care Network (ACCN) and the Arkansas Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, with support from the Blue & You Foundation and Walmart Foundation, partnered in 2022 to implement a demonstration of HealthySteps in Arkansas. Arkansas is a preferred state for HealthySteps, meaning the program prioritized bringing seven new sites on board, promoting sustainability beyond philanthropic investment, and making sure HealthySteps reaches even more children and families across the state.

From the beginning, the Excel by Eight
Foundations Collaborative – with support from
the HealthySteps national office (HSNO) – began
working with policymakers to identify strategies
for sustaining this evidence-based model for
pediatric primary care. As a result of these efforts,
the Department of Human Services (DHS) has
put into place several policies that will provide
Medicaid payments to pediatricians and
family physicians for providing HealthySteps
in their clinics.

THIS WORK COUNTS

From July 2022 to June 2023, 12,616 children received services through HealthySteps.

Developmental and Maternal Depression Screenings

DHS now requires – and will reimburse – primary care physicians to conduct universal early childhood developmental screenings for children based upon the Bright Futures/American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Recommendations for Preventive Pediatric Health Care. Also referred to as the "Periodicity Schedule," these guidelines include a schedule of screenings and assessments recommended at each well-child visit from infancy through adolescence.

Additionally, DHS will pay for maternal depression screenings during a pediatric visit. Clinics can bill retroactively to January 1, 2023.

Reimbursement Rate

The passage of Act 513 during the 2023 legislative session provides a supplemental reimbursement rate for pediatricians and family doctors offering the HealthySteps model. DHS will pay a supplemental per member per month rate of \$3.44 for patients 0-48 months at approved HealthySteps sites, which will help cover the costs of the HealthySteps specialist. Health care providers across Arkansas have a terrific opportunity to offer more intensive services for infants and toddlers and their families.

Undergirding all of this success was the ongoing teamwork among multiple organizations working together to make it happen. Many hours have been spent working through all the pieces needed to carry out the demonstration, including hiring, training, data collection, ongoing learning, policy advocacy/implementation, communication, and sustainability.

Goals and Recommendations

Goal:

Every family of infants and toddlers is able to receive social, developmental, and behavioral screening and referrals to needed health care and community supports.

Recommendations:

 Complete the regulatory process to implement evidence-based pediatric primary care models for early childhood, such as HealthySteps, and communicate changes to health care providers. Expand evidence-based pediatric primary care models, such as HealthySteps, to more practices, including family physician offices and rural sites.

• Seek funding to implement process-improvement strategies to educate providers about how to ensure parents feel valued and heard in health care settings.





Supported Families

Infants and toddlers need quality health care; stimulating learning opportunities; and nurturing, responsive relationships for healthy development. A system of support should be in place at or before birth to ensure every child and parent receives the needed information, assessments, and referrals for a strong start. Home visiting programs are a key strategy for providing these resources.

Home visiting is a voluntary program that takes place in the homes of families with young children. Caregivers are matched with trained providers from their own communities, such as educators, nurses, or social workers. During these regular visits, providers focus on enhancing prenatal care, strengthening the parent-child relationship, promoting early learning, or identifying and addressing potential health and developmental issues.

Families who participate in home visiting programs experience fewer infant deaths, fewer ER visits, fewer reported instances of child abuse and neglect, are more prepared for school, and have higher rates of well-child visits and immunizations.

THIS WORK COUNTS

Since 2019, **2,200**additional infants and toddlers and their families are receiving home visiting services each year through Early Steps to School Success, Family Connects, HIPPY, Nurturing Families, Parents as Teachers, and SafeCare.

Goals and Recommendations

Goal:

All expecting and current parents are able to receive parenting supports that address comprehensive health, wellbeing, and development topics and are tailored to individual family needs.

Recommendations:

- Expand evidence-based targeted and universal home visiting strategies.
- Implement Maternal Life360 for pregnant women and new mothers at birthing hospitals.
- Increase pay for home visitors and improve service delivery by braiding existing funding sources.





Business Coalition

Quality child care is essential to a thriving Arkansas economy, and business has long been overlooked as a key component of solving the child care challenges in Arkansas. Working parents need safe, reliable, and affordable child care to build successful careers, remain contributing members of the workforce, and support their families.

In a recent survey of Arkansas parents, 34% of respondents reported that they or someone in their household has left a job, not taken a job, or changed jobs because of problems with child care in the last 12 months. The child care crisis costs Arkansas's economy \$865 million a year; this includes costs to businesses and to tax revenue because of turnover and absences or employees.¹

Since 2020, Excel by Eight has mobilized Arkansas businesses to identify workable solutions that address the three critical elements of the child care crisis – accessibility, affordability, and quality – and its impact on the state's current and future workforce. Beginning with the initial 17 members of the 2020 Task Force, the Business Coalition grew by 75% to 30 members by the end of 2023.

Our goal for 2024 is to double the number of businesses who are part of the Coalition. A significant focus for growth is small- and medium-sized businesses in the Delta and southern regions of the state. The Coalition held its first quarterly meeting in early 2024 to discuss policy goals and possible legislation for making Arkansas a more family-friendly place to work.



Scan the QR code for an updated list of Business Coalition members and to learn how your business or organization can get involved.

High-Quality Child Care and Early Learning

On March 8, 2023, Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed Act 237, known as the Arkansas LEARNS Act, into law. The LEARNS Act established an Office of Early Childhood within the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) to unify the state's early childhood education system. Excel by Eight's network has worked closely with ADE on the early learning component of LEARNS.

Excel by Eight Represented in Early Learning Work Group

Members of the Excel by Eight Foundations
Collaborative applied to be part of the LEARNS
Rulemaking Work Groups that will advise the
Department of Education on the early learning
components of LEARNS. Of the 16 members of
the Early Learning work group, three individuals
are part of the E8 network: policy team members
Anna Strong and Jamie Ward and family advisor
Fredricka Tabor.

Excel by Eight Communities Selected as Local Leads

Following a competitive application process, ADE selected 12 pilot organizations to serve as local leads. We are pleased that three of our six Excel by Eight Communities are included in this initial cohort: Independence County, Sevier County, and Little Rock.

Local leads are charged with establishing a comprehensive, locally supported plan for supporting early childhood programs and services within their communities. These organizations serve as the designated early childhood captain for the community and are responsible for bringing stakeholders and local partners together to address the needs of children, their families, and employers. We are encouraged

by what we have seen in the early stages of the implementation process and look forward to hearing about the plans these local leads develop.

Bridging the Pay Gap for Early Childhood Educators

The Arkansas Early Childhood Association offers the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Arkansas Scholarship Program, a national, evidence-based strategy that creates access to higher education for teachers, directors, and family child care providers working with young children. T.E.A.C.H., which stands for Teacher Education and Compensation Helps, was developed to upgrade the level of education of teachers working with young children while making the educational process affordable, resulting in increased wages and reduced turnover.

In 2023, **376** early childhood educators were enrolled in the program, about 180 of whom work with infants and toddlers. Over the past state fiscal year, 20 educators completed certificates or degrees through T.E.A.C.H., leading to an increase in quality care for 294 infants and toddlers.

Step Up to WAGE\$ is a companion program to T.E.A.C.H. This education-based wage supplement initiative pays biannual stipends to teaching staff serving ages birth to 5 years. It provides annual stipends to early childhood educators ranging from \$500 to \$6,000 based on level of education. Of the 1,882 WAGE\$ recipients in 2023, 75% work in a program rated a 3-Star Better Beginnings level or higher.



Goals and Recommendations

Goal:

Quality child care is affordable and accessible for all families.

Recommendations:

- Make child care more affordable for middle income families through tax credits directly to families and employer tax policies to be developed in collaboration with the business community.
- Develop a more family-friendly system to help families learn about/access/apply for early childhood education programs (vouchers, ABC, Head Start, EIDT, etc.).
- Ensure providers, including family child care homes, are financially viable:
 - Determine if reimbursement rates are covering the cost of quality care, and increase rates if needed.
 - Address state and local policies, regulations, zoning, permitting, and other structural barriers that prevent access to high-quality child care.
 - Pay vouchers in 12-month contracts based on enrollment vs. attendance.
 - Develop shared services for providers that address HR, accounting, insurance, etc.

Goal:

All early childhood educators are well-prepared for the complexity of child development and receive commensurate compensation and benefits.

Recommendations:

- Improve wages and benefits for early childhood educators:
 - Maintain T.E.A.C.H. and WAGE\$ when ARPA funding expires.
 - Adopt the Unifying
 Framework for the Early
 Childhood Education
 profession.
 - Pay early childhood educators on par with public school teachers.
 - Allow early childhood educators to participate in the teacher retirement system.



THIS WORK COUNTS

Since its inception, T.E.A.C.H. has made it possible for early childhood educators to afford both the time and expense of furthering their education, leading to an improved quality of care for young children in Arkansas.

Maternal Health

For every 100,000 babies born in Arkansas from 2018-2021, about 43.5 mothers died of pregnancy-associated complications.² This is the highest rate of maternal mortality in the United States. Drivers of adverse maternal outcomes include food and housing insecurity, chronic stress, and provider shortages and hospital quality. Socioeconomic and racial disparities exacerbate this crisis, with Black, non-Hispanic mothers being twice as likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause than white, non-Hispanic mothers.³

Ensuring adequate maternal health care before, during, and after pregnancy is crucial for the healthy development of a child and can reduce the risk of complications during birth. Access to regular prenatal care, appropriate medical

during labor and delivery can help prevent fatalities and serious health issues for mothers and babies across our state.



92% of pregnancy-related deaths that occurred in Arkansas between 2018 and 2020 were likely preventable, according to the 2023 Arkansas Maternal Mortality Review Committee (AMMRC) Legislative Report.

Arkansas Doulas Unite to Improve Maternal Health Outcomes

One proven solution to the maternal health crisis is ensuring that all women have access to doula support. Visionary doulas across Arkansas have come together to form a doula association, with technical assistance provided by E8. The doulas' vision is to advance the profession of birth work through advocacy and education, improve access to doula services, and ensure the consistency and quality of those services. In particular, doulas are advocating to have their services reimbursed by Medicaid and health insurance plans. This association of doulas will serve as part of a larger effort to address the state's growing maternal health crisis.

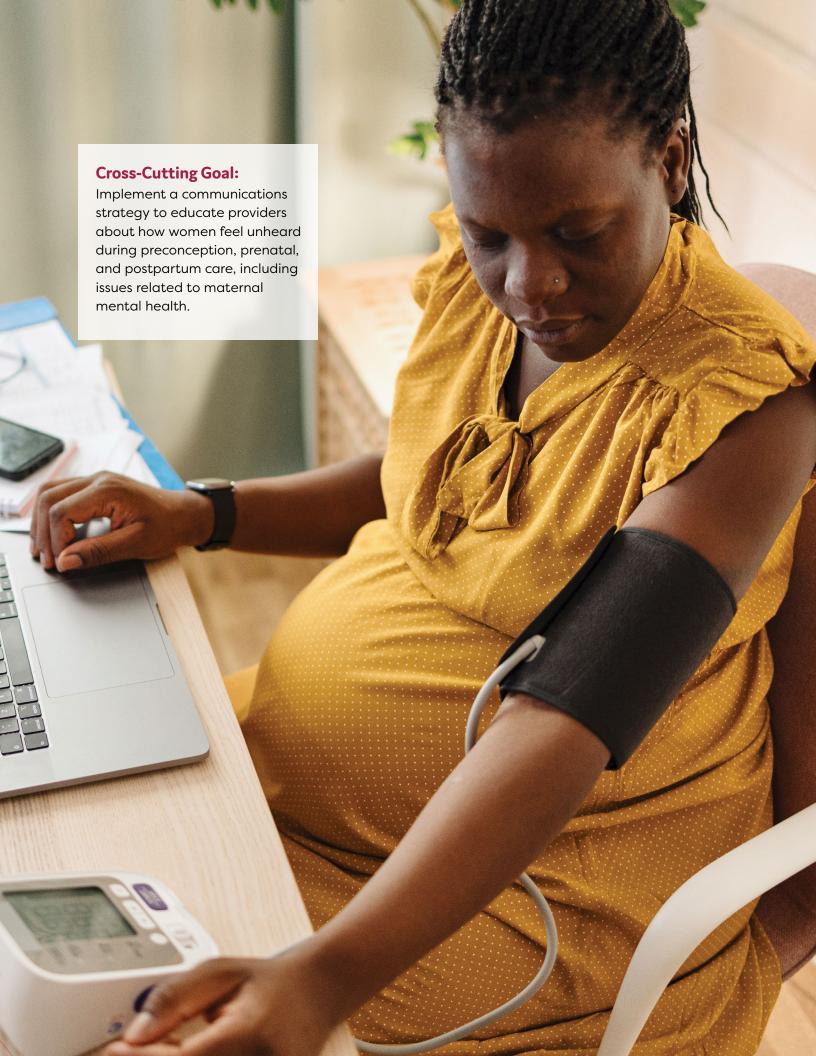
Goals and Recommendations

Goal:

All women are able to receive complete, high-quality preconception, prenatal, and postpartum care.

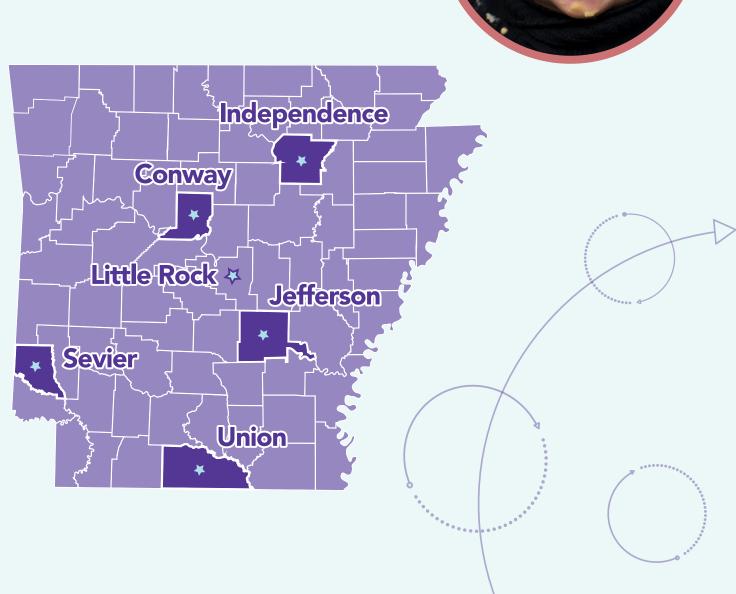
Recommendations:

- Expand postpartum Medicaid coverage for a full year.
- Provide Medicaid and private insurance coverage to include doulas on the birthing team.
- Increase the number of group prenatal care sites, such as Centering Pregnancy, by exploring payer strategies to incentivize practices to adopt such strategies.



Local Communities

Local models for change across Arkansas are designed to strengthen within each community the grids of resources that are necessary for children to thrive. Excel by Eight partners with six communities in this effort: Conway County, Independence County, Little Rock, Sevier County, Union County, and Jefferson County.



Conway County

Engaging Familiesand Empowering Educators

In 2023, Conway County launched a family engagement project designed to facilitate conversations between families of young children and the institutions that serve them. We started in partnership with Curricula Concepts, who hosted Conversation Cafés between families and educators at three school districts.

As a result of the family engagement project, the families reported higher confidence and initiative reaching out to their child's educators after the conversation cafes. Educators reported a commitment to redouble their efforts to reach out to families they serve one-on-one. Ultimately, the Conway County steering committee is learning about barriers to family engagement and incorporating opportunities for family inclusion to each new endeavor.

Strengthening Mental Health Support in Early Education

In its 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment, Arkansas Children's Hospital identified both Conway and Independence County as having behavioral health professional shortages.⁴ Because behavioral health resources are in short supply, teachers and families of young children cannot find the support they need.

The Conway County coalition proposed a two-year project to improve systemic resources for positive mental health in early childhood education classrooms. The steering committee secured the first year of funding for this project and, in 2024, will partner with University of Arkansas at Little Rock's School of Social Work to complete a strengths and needs assessment BehaviorHelp—a statewide expulsion prevention support system for Arkansas early care and education—is an important thought partner in this initiative.

Conway County Steering Committee

John Gibson, E8 Chair, Conway County Community Foundation

Amber Holland, E8 Core Team, Community Service, Inc.

Princess Johnson, E8 Core Team, Parent

Kara Jones, E8 Core Team, Conway County Center for Exceptional Children

Dr. Susan Okroglic, E8 Core Team, Community Service, Inc.

Robbie Belew, Curricula Concepts

Shandee Gordon, Wonderview School District

Shawn Halbrook, South Conway County School District

Lora Hendrix, South Conway County School District

Sarah Hoffman, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)

Aida Kuettle, South Conway County School District

Christy Lemmer, Turquoise Squirrel Learning Center

Stephanie Lipsmeyer, Morrilton Area Chamber of Commerce

Kaila Parker, Parent

Bijoux Pighee, Choosing to Excel

Jenifer Riley, Community Service, Inc.

Jamie Stacks, Wonderview School District

Karey Tapley, South Conway County School District

Tammy Westerman, HIPPY

Candace Williams, Rural Community Alliance

Logan Williams, Nemo Vista School District

Sharon Wilson, South Conway County School District

Independence County

Independence County has goals in four priority areas: Oral Language and Literacy, Child Care Availability and Quality, Early Child Development, and Oral Health.

Championing Early Childhood Education

After years of strategy, planning, and activating improvements to the early childhood education landscape in Independence County, the IMPACT Independence County and Excel by Eight steering committee was awarded the LEARNS Local Lead designation in the fall of 2023. As the designated early childhood captain for the community, this group will bring stakeholders and local partners together to support early childhood programs and services within Independence County.

Building Brains One Conversation at a Time

Independence County public school districts continued to implement LENA during the 2023 school year. **LENA** – short for **L**anguage **EN**vironment **A**nalysis – is a professional development opportunity for early childhood educators that uses cloud-based software and a small, wearable device – often referred to as

a "talk pedometer" – to measure and increase conversational turns that happen between a child and an adult caregiver.

These conversational turns, the simple backand-forth interactions between a child and an adult, are crucial to early brain development. The program – which started in the fall of 2022 – certified 51 teachers by the end of 2023, with an additional 44 educators in the pipeline for certification by spring 2024. To date, the program has increased conversational turns at an overall average rate of 23% for 491 children. For children in the bottom third of talk in their classrooms, the conversational turns increased at an average rate of 70%.

Improving the Oral Health of Young Children

Independence County has worked to strengthen its network of early childhood professionals, dentists, pediatricians and family doctors, and home visitors to prevent dental decay in young children. The network exists to spread awareness about dental hygiene for children under age 5 and refer children to dental care with the intent of helping them find their dental home.



Independence County Steering Committee

Jamie Rayford, Chair, Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce

LaToshia Carroll, Cedar Ridge School District
Shawn Craig, Cedar Ridge School District
Jennifer Douglas, Batesville School District
Amy Finster, White River Health System
Mary-Katherine Hardin, STARS Academy
Valarie Hibbitts, Midland School District
Novella Humphrey, Southside School District
Kristie Jenkins, Southside School District
Crystal Johnson, Batesville Area Chamber of
Commerce

Abbi Limbaugh, Cedar Ridge School District
Lorrie McClure, Batesville School District
Lisa McGhee, Southside School District
Bani Meharg, Midland School District
Dr. Lesley Milton, Tooth Be Told Pediatric
Dentistry

Debbie Mize, Child Care Aware of Northcentral Arkansas

Brandi Nelson, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences North Central

Leslie Patterson, Pinnacle Pointe

Amy Pinkston, Child Care Aware of Northcentral Arkansas

Dr. Julia Roulier, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences North Central

Mindy Shaw, Batesville School District

Warren Spillman, ARcare

Gracie Wolfe, STARS Academy

Beverly Wright, University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville

Dr. Nikki Yonts, Lyon College





In August 2023, the Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce led a successful campaign to refinance existing recreating bonds in Batesville, which would allow \$25 million for improvements to parks and recreation. Scan the QR code to read more about this transformative investment.

Jefferson County

Jefferson County's steering committee has been formalized and includes representatives from K-12 education, health, home visiting, business, philanthropy, and higher education. This local steering committee will soon launch the research phase of the E8 process, gathering community input on priority areas by hosting data walk events and talking with parents, educators, service providers, and other stakeholders who work on behalf of families with children ages 0-8.

Data walks are gallery-style presentations of statistics related to boxes on the E8 resource grid. Excel by Eight presents initial data to participants and asks them to react. This helps us better understand where children are excelling and where we may need to shore up local resources.

Jefferson County hosted Excel by Eight's Fall Learning Community in November 2023. Representatives from each of Excel by Eight's six communities came together in Pine Bluff at the Arkansas River Education Service Cooperative for two days of relationship building, learning, and idea sharing. Excel by Eight extends a special thank you to the Jefferson County steering committee and the team at the Arkansas River ESC for being such gracious hosts.

Jefferson County Steering Committee

Cathi Swan, Chair, Arkansas River Education Service Cooperative

Peter Austin, Jefferson Regional Medical Center

Jennifer Barbaree, Pine Bluff School District **Dr. Steven Bloomberg**, Southeast Arkansas College

Dr. Kimberly Davis, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

Jason Duren, United Way of Southeast Arkansas

Sherrie James, Southeast Behavioral Healthcare System

Angela Lopez, Arkansas Department of Human Services

Dr. Sarper Turker, Arkansas Lighthouse Charter Schools

Chad Pitillo. Simmons Bank

Allison Thompson, Jefferson County Alliance Dr. Gary Williams, White Hall School District Tom Wilson, Watson Chapel School District



Little Rock

Early childhood education was a focus area for the Little Rock steering committee in 2023. The City of Little Rock, in partnership with the local Excel by Eight Steering Committee, was selected as an Early Childhood Education Local Lead organization by the Arkansas Department of Education. As the designated early childhood captain for the community, this group will bring stakeholders and local partners together to support early childhood programs and services within Little Rock.

Mapping Child Care in Little Rock

The Little Rock steering committee completed a research project outlining the state of child care in the city to quantify the number of children under 5, the number of available child care slots, and average cost by quality rating. As this data was analyzed, the steering committee also considered areas of the city where child care is least likely to be found.

The data showed that an estimated 8,350 infants and toddlers live in Little Rock with more than half concentrated in four ZIP codes: 72209, 72204, 72211, and 72223. Of the 303 quality slots in these targeted ZIP codes, only 6% of children have access to quality care. Furthermore, the average annual tuition for quality infant care in Little Rock is \$7,777; this is 35% higher than what is allocated for child care in the survival budget for ALICE families living in Pulaski County.

Fostering Economic Growth through Early Childhood Entrepreneurship

Little Rock was among 40 cities from 22 states selected to participate in the National League of Cities' City Inclusive Entrepreneurship program. As part of the program, the City of Little Rock committed to mapping current business supports and financial opportunities for early childhood education providers to foster economic growth in the community. This program included nine months of technical assistance and peer learning alongside representatives from Wichita, Kansas; New Orleans, Louisiana; Columbia, Missouri; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Little Rock Steering Committee

Jennifer Glasgow, Chair, City of Little Rock Sarah Argue, Pulaski County Imagination Library

Tiffani Fletcher, Child Care Aware of Central and Southwest Arkansas

Charity Hallman, Hope Credit Union

Esther Jones, Little Rock School District – Early Childhood Education

Tyra Larkin, UAMS Head Start

Amanda Orgel, Central Arkansas Library

Mollie Palmer, Heart of Arkansas United Way

Anna Strong, Little Rock School District, Board of Directors and Arkansas Chapter – American Academy of Pediatrics

Kim Toots, Save the Children



Sevier County

The Sevier County steering committee made substantial progress in priority areas of healthy food, access to books, physical activity, and early care and education. Pairing increased access to free summer meals with early literacy opportunities and supportive community resources has been the ideal trifecta for Sevier County.

Horatio School District, Public Libraries Partner to Provide Free Summer Meals to Children in Southwest Arkansas

A few years ago, residents in Sevier County set priorities that would help children in their community thrive. Strengthening resources for and improving access to healthy food became a priority as a result of a community-led research effort.

In Sevier County, 18% of children under 18 years of age in Sevier County are food insecure. A grant from No Kid Hungry increased the community's capacity for purchasing, preparing, and serving nutritious meals to residents under age 18 during the summer. Through the "Seamless Summer" program, Horatio School District and public libraries in Horatio, Gillham, Lockesburg, and Winthrop served as non-congregate sites for free summer meals for children and teens, regardless of the school district they attend.





Sevier County's Seamless Summer program earned a 2023 Acting Out Against Hunger award from the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance. Scan the QR code to watch the video that was shown at the awards breakfast.



Unlike congregate meal service, where meals must be consumed at a school or other site location, non-congregate sites offer meals togo. This makes it ideal for rural communities that don't have access to a congregate meal site because of geographic sprawl. In total, the community served 1,139 children in 2023, which is a 182% increase in meal distribution over the previous year.

As a result of the program's success, the Excel by Eight and the Sevier County Steering Committee earned a 2023 Acting Out Against Hunger award from the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance. Additionally, the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance and the national No Kid Hungry Campaign (led by Share Our Strength) teamed up to visit Sevier County and show the value and power in community partnerships.



Commitment to Early Learning

Sevier County was awarded the LEARNS Local Lead designation in the fall of 2023. As the designated early childhood captain for the community, this group will bring stakeholders and local partners together to support early childhood programs and services within Sevier County.

Additionally, the community continued its work with the Early Learning Parks Project it began in 2021, installing more book trees to increase access to books for its youngest readers. The steering committee assisted the City of Horatio in securing more playground equipment at Hendrix Park to draw families to the early learning and motor skill development resources available. In 2024, Sevier County plans to promote literacy and movement throughout the community by installing a StoryWalk® in other parts of the county.

Other plans for 2024 include analyzing strategies and mapping action items for further expansion of Seamless Summer, supporting Sevier County's LEARNS Local Lead organization, and promoting kindergarten readiness and maternal health.

Sevier County Steering Committee

Rhonda Barringer, Gillham Public Library
Curtis Black, Horatio High School
Jeff Brown, Mayor of De Queen
Janet Cantrell, University of Arkansas
Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension
Service

Wendy Clay, Lockesburg Public Library
Johyne Fisher, De Queen Public Library
Jeana Ford, Horatio Elementary School
Susan Lansdell, Winthrop Public Library
Deborah Neel, Horatio City Council
Kelli Parsons, De Queen-Mena Educational
Cooperative

Mary Runnels, Arkansas Department of Human Services

Catherine Smith, Horatio Public Library **Angie Walker**, Dr. Randy Walker Family

Practice & Allergy Clinic **Alexis Young**, Little Bitty City Enrichment

Gayla Youngblood, Horatio Public Schools



Center

Union County

The E8 coalition in Union County, led by the SHARE Foundation and United Way, have identified four priority areas in alignment with their organizational goals and the Excel by Eight resource grid. Priorities include child care availability, mental health, parent and family resources, and affordable housing. The steering committee will continue to work to approve goals, guide needs assessments, and review and evaluate strategies that are locally appropriate, feasible, and impactful for children ages 0-8 and their families.

Excel by Eight is saddened by the passing of Alexis Alexander, executive director of United Way of Union County and vital member of the E8 Core Team for Union County. Alexis died unexpectedly on July 29, 2023, at the age of 50. Her impact on the El Dorado community was immense. She championed local causes within her work with the United Way, helping to fund and support numerous local nonprofits and spearhead causes such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Our hearts continue to go out to her friends, family, colleagues, and all who loved her.



In Loving Memory of Alexis Alexander (May 22, 1973 – July 29, 2023)

Union County Steering Committee

Karen Hicks, E8 Core Team, El Dorado-Union County Chamber of Commerce

Amy Sturdivant, E8 Core Team, SHARE Foundation

Tyler Turner, E8 Core Team, United Way of Union County

Jill Weinischke, E8 Core Team, SHARE Foundation

Gloria Billings, Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Service

Pam Blake, Families and Children Together (F.A.C.T.), Inc.

Becky Dixon, Smackover-Norphlet School District

Heidi Klappenbach, Family Connects

Kathy Love, Hannah Pregnancy Resource Center

Ellen Lowe, Junction City School District

Debbie McAdams, El Dorado School District

Kaitlyn Rigdon, Union County Chamber of Commerce

Tequila Smith, Families and Children Together (F.A.C.T.), Inc.

Kimberly Thomas, Strong-Huttig School District





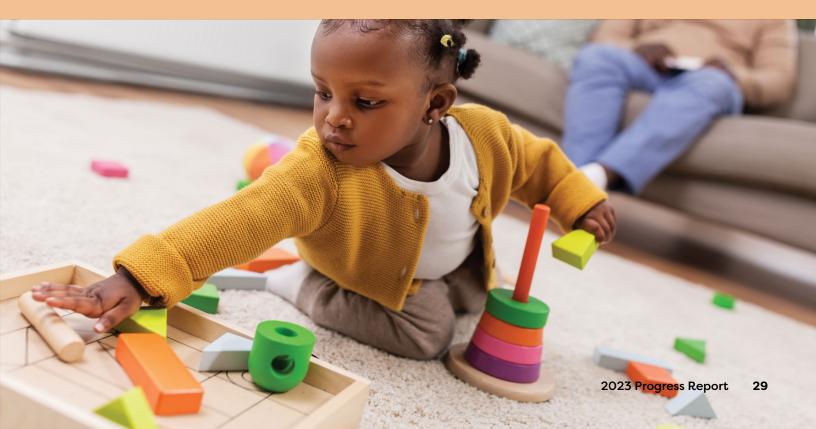
Excel by Eight Milestones

FAMILY	BASELINE	PROGRESS	GOAL
Number of funded home visiting slots ⁵	2018-19 8,221	2022-23 9,125	2030 30,000
Children receiving books through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library ⁶	2019 30,031/month	2023 82,198/month	2030 191,000/month
COMMUNITY	BASELINE	PROGRESS	GOAL
Children (0-18) under 200% of poverty	2019 76%	2021 6.8%	2030 5.0%

HEALTH		BASELINE	PROGRESS	GOAL
	Medicaid recipients 3, 4, and 5 years of age who had one or more well-child visits with a primary care provider during the year ⁸	2017 57%	2021 61%	2030 70%
	Medicaid recipients birth to 5 who received any dental or oral health service ⁹	2018 33%	2021 33%	2030 35%
	Medicaid recipients receiving dyadic mental health services ¹⁰	2018-19 1,421	2022-23 1,093	2030 TBD
	Statewide participation in free and reduced- price school breakfast compared to lunch ¹¹	2018-19 63%	2021-22 65%	2030 70%
	Child food insecurity rate ¹²	2017 23%	2021 19%	2030 20%
	6 th , 8 th , 10 th , and 12 th graders who ever used any drug, including alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, and other illegal drugs ¹³	2018 20%	2022 19%	2030 18.5%

who are uninsured7

	EDUCATION		BASELINE	PROGRESS	GOAL
MEASURES —————		Child care vouchers paying for a slot in a Level 3 Better Beginnings rated program ¹⁴	2018-19 Infants & Toddlers: 2,086 3-5 years of age: 3,649	2022-23 Infants & Toddlers: 5,707 3-5 years of age: 7,157	2030 All vouchers pay for slots in Level 3 programs or higher.
		Children receiving at least one ASQ or Brigance screen at 9, 18, and 30 months ¹⁵	2018-19 NR	2022-23 8,800	2030 32,025
		3 rd graders meeting reading readiness benchmark on the state assessment, the ACT Aspire ¹⁶	2018-19 38%	2022-23 32%	2030 80%
		4 th graders reading at proficient or above according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress ¹⁷	2019 31% Arkansas ranks 43 rd	2022 30% Arkansas ranks 39 th	2030 Arkansas ranks in the top 25 states
		Students receiving dyslexia interventions ¹⁸	2018-19 4.8%	2022-23 6.8%	2030 20%



Excel by Eight Foundations Collaborative

The Excel by Eight Foundations Collaborative works to update and implement our policy agenda that builds on existing knowledge of how to best support families with young children.

American Heart Association

AR Kids Read

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

Arkansas Birthing Project

Arkansas Center for Health Improvement

Arkansas Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics

Arkansas Community Action Agencies Association, Inc.

Arkansas Community Foundation

Arkansas Department of Education

Arkansas Department of Education, Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education

Arkansas Department of Health

Arkansas Department of Health, Office of Health Disparities Elimination

Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services

Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Medical Services

Arkansas Early Childhood Association

Arkansas Foundation for Medical Care

Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance

Arkansas Perinatal Quality Collaborative

Arkansas Research Center (UCA)

Arkansas State University Childhood Services

Arkansas United

Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce

Batesville Preschool

Batesville School District

Centers for Youth and Families

Central Arkansas Library System

Child Care Aware of Central and Southwest Arkansas

Child Care Aware of Northcentral Arkansas

City of Horatio

City of Little Rock

City of Pine Bluff

Community Service, Inc.

Conway County Center for Exceptional Children
- Beginning Preschool and Step by Step Early
Learning Center

Conway County Excel By Eight

Cre8ting Changes "Sankofa" Birthing Project & Doula Maternal Health Services

DeQueen-Mena Education Service Cooperative

dot2dot consulting, llc

Early Childhood Solutions

El Dorado-Union County Chamber of Commerce

Excellerate Foundation

First Connections, Early Intervention under IDEA, Part C

FoodCorps Arkansas

Forward Arkansas

Good Morning Sunshine Preschool-Family Home Childcare

Head Start State Collaboration Office

Hope Enterprise Corporation

Horatio-Garner Memorial Library

Little Rock School District

Little Rock School District Pre-K Program

Lockesburg Library

Midland Tiny Tots

Office for Education Policy, University of Arkansas

Partners for Inclusive Communities

River Valley HIPPY

Rural Community Alliance

Save the Children Head Start

Save The Children, Arkansas

South Conway County School District

Southside School District

STARS Academy

Texarkana Area Community Foundation

Ujima Maternity Network

University of Arkansas at Little Rock Children International

University of Arkansas Early Care and Education Projects

University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Department of Family and Preventive Medicine

University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, North Central Family Medicine

University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Office of Community Health and Research

White River Health

Wildcat Wellness Center - El Dorado School District

Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

Women's Foundation of Arkansas

Wonderview Preschool

Wonderview School District

Zero to Three





Excel by Eight Foundations Leadership Team 2023-2024

The E8 Foundations leadership team was formed in late 2022 to oversee Excel by Eight's yearlong planning process. Creating a leadership team made up of family advisors and key collaborative members has been critical in moving toward a process that is led by collaborative members rather than staff.

Betsy Anderson
Tabitha McNulty
Jamie Rayford
Paula Stone
Fredricka Tabor
Beth Tody
Ramona Wallace
Adena White
LeCole White
Shaneil "P.J." Yarbrough



Family Advisors

The Family Advisor Council is a diverse group of parent and family leaders who advise, collaborate, and lead efforts that support the E8 vision and strong start statement. The Family Advisor Council supports the Excel By Eight vision by lending their authentic voices as parent leaders in sharing lived experiences, engaging others, and informing solution-oriented strategies to improve the lives of young children and families in Arkansas.

Betsy Anderson

Nicole Bedard

Laci Bratton

Ashley Henry

Suliana Hurtado

Arisbeth Johnson

Tiffany Lepard Tassin

Takiya Robinson

Dr. Cemeka Agugbuem Smith

Rebeca Soto

Fredricka Tabor

Beth Tody

Susan Wilkins

Take Action

Families, policymakers, and business and community leaders can help strengthen resource grids in Arkansas to give children a strong start.



Families

- Make sure the children in your life receive their well-child checkups and developmental screens at their 9-month, 18-month, and 30-month visits.
- Visit the Better Beginnings website at ARBetterBeginnings.com to find quality early childhood programs for your children or extended family members.
- Track your child's milestones with the CDC's "Learn the Signs. Act Early." tools at cdc.gov/milestones.

Communities

- Develop partnerships to expand home visiting services.
- Develop partnerships among early childhood education providers, schools, and local dentists to ensure children receive preventive oral health care and treatment.
- Work with mental health providers in your community to make sure they are providing dyadic mental health services for young children and their caregivers.

Businesses

- Join our Business Coalition to help advance policy that impacts child care in Arkansas.
- Participate in quarterly meetings to share insights from the business community.
- Share messages about the importance of investing in early childhood education with other business and community leaders as well as policymakers.

Policymakers

- Ensure young children receive the developmental and autism screenings and services they need to reach their full potential.
- Increase the quality of early childhood education programs.
- Make child care affordable for families.



A References

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- 17 U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1998–2022 Reading Assessments.
- 18 Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. My School Info. https://myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov.





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