

2025  
Year in Review



**BUILDING  
BRIGHTER  
FUTURES**

“Start Early has stepped up as a national leader, drawing on our deep expertise across program, policy and research to translate national urgency into local support.”

— Leadership Letter, page 5



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# TOGETHER WE ARE MEETING THE MOMENT

This past year has tested the resolve of the early learning field in ways few of us could have predicted. Delayed federal and state funding, regional office closures and shifting policy landscapes have created real threats and uncertainty for early learning and care programs, providers and the families they serve.

Start Early has stepped up as a national leader, drawing on our deep expertise across program, policy and research to translate national urgency into local support. In response to the immediate threats to Head Start, we launched **Together for Head Start**, a nationwide campaign that brings state, regional association and grantees together, supports advocates and amplifies the voices of families and educators. This work has generated thousands of advocacy actions, put critical data and stories in front of policymakers and helped secure bipartisan attention to Head Start funding at a pivotal moment.

The same spirit of collaboration that drives our national advocacy extends to our networks across the country, where communities continue to learn from one another. Our convenings and peer-to-peer networks have become essential sources of support and connection, especially during this tumultuous time. They surface practical solutions, build shared strategy and strengthen local capacity to advocate for our youngest learners. When communities learn from one another, real systems change is possible. We remain steadfast in our commitment to early childhood education and care and will continue to advance broad, bipartisan support for the field.

Looking ahead, we will continue to lead and respond to the most pressing needs of the early learning and care system. Our **Together for Head Start** campaign will expand further this year to parallel efforts to protect home visiting and services for young children with disabilities. As always, we will center families and providers in every step of our work.

All of this happens only with the sustained commitment of our community of donors, partners and professionals across the early childhood field. Thank you for standing with us, for children, for families and for a brighter future we can build when we show up together.

With gratitude,



**Diana Mendley Rauner, Ph.D.**  
President, Start Early



**Mary Hasten**  
Chair, Start Early Board of Directors

# IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

## How We Work

Start Early leverages our programmatic and systems building expertise to create, test and scale innovative solutions that transform early learning. We deliver high-quality programs and services, scale best practices and advocate for policy change at local, state and national levels.



## Mission

Start Early advances quality learning for families with children, before birth through their earliest years to help close the opportunity gap.

## Vision

We believe that Early Learning and Care should be a public good which is widely accessible, collectively funded and locally controlled so that every child has an equitable opportunity to reach their full potential to thrive.



# IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

Last year, Start Early's broad and innovative efforts to improve early childhood education and development opportunities for children birth through age 5 and their families produced measurable impact:



**4,073**

Children served through Head Start and Home Visiting & Doula Network

**16,782**

Professionals reached across all 50 states through our professional learning services and the National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement

**790,945**

Children received improved early learning experiences



**40**

Policy changes for children

**\$534 Million**

In new investments in early childhood

**4 Million+**

Children benefitting from policy and systems changes





# Strong Early Childhood Systems





# Start Early is focused on transforming the nation's patchwork of child care, preschool, home visiting programs and other early learning supports into a continuum of effective, publicly funded prenatal-to-5 programs that respond to the unique needs of children and families.

Our policy and advocacy work bridges from local to federal: we advocate for children and families in our home states of Illinois and Washington, we consult with state and community leaders to build strong policies and systems across the country, and we are a national voice for early childhood at the federal level. We focus on:

In FY 2025, our priorities reflected the urgent needs of protecting and reimagining Head Start through our **Together for Head Start** campaign, expanding access and workforce support for home visiting services, and safeguarding critical supports for young children with disabilities.



**Building responsive and inclusive systems.**

We advance policy and improve the continuum of care so that services are responsive, effective and inclusive in meeting the needs of families and children.



**Centering families and providers.** By shifting the power to families, providers and communities in policymaking, advocacy and governance, those who are most impacted by the programs shape decisions, priorities and investments.



**Increasing access to early learning and care as a publicly funded resource.** We support communities, states and federal agencies to increase investment into a comprehensive set of early childhood programs and services.

# CHAMPIONING A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

This past year, Head Start programs across the country faced unprecedented challenges that threatened services for nearly 700,000 young children and their families. “These disruptions create deep uncertainty and pull energy away from what matters most, supporting children and families,” Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, Start Early’s Senior Vice President of Government Relations & Research, said.

In response, Start Early launched **Together for Head Start**, a national advocacy campaign that mobilizes Congress, engages the media and unites early childhood partners to safeguard funding and support Early/Head Start programs. “Our goal is to be a bridge from the local level to national level,” Yvette explained. “We coordinate, collaborate and co-create resources so every community has the tools and support they need.”

“

Together for Head Start is more than a campaign; it’s a movement.”

---

— Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, Senior Vice President, Government Relations & Research, Start Early

The campaign is already making an impact. When a proposed federal budget threatened to eliminate funding, Start Early worked with national and regional associations to elevate grantee concerns, helping secure a Senate proposal to **increase funding to \$12.36 billion, an \$85 million gain over last year.** We also created an advocacy toolkit, generated **6,400 letters and calls** to Congress **across 49 states** and convened regular coalition meetings to share strategies and provide immediate support to programs.

With families and providers at the center of this movement, Start Early is charting a path toward a future where every child, no matter their ZIP code, has access to the high-quality care and learning they need to thrive.







# A VOICE FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Start Early has been a champion for young children with disabilities and developmental delays for decades in Illinois. We are now sharing our expertise with leaders across the country as a national voice for policy change locally, in states across the country and federally. Achievements from the past year include:

## **Illinois State-wide Advocacy**

We led, in partnership with a statewide coalition of nonprofits, the **Babies Can't Wait** campaign, mobilizing families and providers across Illinois in support of Early Intervention through rallies, attracting 1,000 people, local and national media coverage and petitions with 3,000 signatures to the Illinois Governor and state legislators.

## **Policy Changes Across Multiple States**

Start Early Consulting partnered in 11 states across the U.S. to build more inclusive systems. In Texas, our partners

at Texans Care for Children passed a new bill requiring three state agencies to create and implement a strategic plan to improve inclusion and transitions for young children with disabilities.

## **National Thought Leadership to Advance Policy**

Start Early stepped into a leadership role as a national voice for children with disabilities, analyzing federal policy changes, building a coalition of national organizations and creating resources for advocates and systems leaders to shape policy across the U.S.



“

Thousands of families are still waiting for the Early Intervention services to which they are legally entitled.”

---

— **Babies Can't Wait, Raising Illinois**



## HIGHLIGHTS

### New Systems Mapping Tool for Communities

Piloted **systems mapping in five communities** to help local leaders create dynamic, digital dashboards of early childhood data and plan for better decisions, advocacy and collaboration. Start Early Consulting is planning to roll out the new Systems Mapping tool for communities across the country in 2026.



### Thought Leadership and Convening Power

## 50+

**Policy and research pieces**, op-eds and publications advancing prenatal-to-5 systems change were disseminated.

## 1,000+

**Early childhood leaders** connected through convenings, peer-learning and federal coalition work.

### Advocacy in Action

## 12,000+

Advocates and policymakers engaged with Start Early's national policy email list spanning all **50 states**.

## 300

Advocates traveled to Springfield for **Illinois Early Childhood Advocacy Day**, influencing funding increases for the Early Childhood Block Grant, Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity, child care, home visiting and Early Intervention.

## \$100 Million

**Start Early Washington** helped secure funding in the state's **2025-27 Capital Budget** to expand early learning infrastructure statewide.

Additionally, the Early Learning Facilities Coalition led passage of **House Bill 1314** which established an Emergency Fund to assist early learning providers in responding to unforeseen crises, as well as removed "matching fund" requirements for the ELF Fund, increasing access for early learning providers.





## Effective Early Learning Programs





Every child deserves access to inclusive, high-quality early learning that reflects their culture, language and unique strengths. In our home states of Illinois and Washington, we champion and uplift the early childhood workforce, providing professional development, cross-sector learning opportunities and innovative tools to help educators thrive. Building on our workforce development in states, we innovate and scale opportunities for early childhood education professionals across the country.

By sharing these proven practices and data-driven insights we support continuous improvement and spark innovation so early learning professionals everywhere can deliver the best outcomes for children and families.



# EDUCARE CHICAGO'S 25 YEARS OF INNOVATION AND IMPACT

Twenty-five years ago, Start Early opened Educare Chicago on the city's South Side with a bold mission to provide high-quality early learning that could transform the lives of young children and their families.

The school's roots stretch back to the Beethoven Project in the Robert Taylor Homes, where Start Early first pioneered a comprehensive birth-to-five program. When the housing development began to come down in the late 1990s, Start Early listened to the data, learned from families and built something even stronger: a permanent, research-based early learning center that would become a national model, today known as Educare.

Educare Chicago's success sparked a movement. What began as a single school is now the Educare Network, a coast-to-coast partnership of 25, and soon 27, Educare schools delivering inclusive, family-driven early learning and care. Start Early has been a champion and steadfast partner in building this network, sharing lessons, elevating family voice and shaping public policy so more children can benefit.

From one pioneering school to a nationwide footprint, Educare stands as evidence of Start Early's vision, when

families, educators and communities come together around quality education, children's futures are limitless.

The next chapter is already taking shape with Educare Lake County, in Illinois, expanding access and programming for a new generation of families.

**4,349**

**Children  
served through  
the Educare  
Network**



Danielle Jordan, Director, Educare Chicago and Diana Rauner, President, Start Early



Rendering of Educare Lake County as of October 2025; opening targeted in 2027.

## Growing Impact in Lake County, IL

Our new school in northern Chicagoland will address the critical lack of early learning and development programs available to families throughout Lake County.

Educare Lake County is being designed and built alongside the community to ensure the school serves children and families with essential early learning and care programs and services. It will support our efforts to build the capacity and expertise of early learning programs across the County.

While Start Early is in the process of building this school, we launched interim programming in two temporary locations in Waukegan and Beach Park

to immediately support 141 children through center and home-based programming, doula services and family child care homes.



“We are committed to partnering with the Lake County community to ensure this school reflects its unique needs, visions and dreams.”

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— Celena Sarillo, Executive Director, Start Early Illinois



# DESIGNING WITH HEART

Building strong early learning experiences goes beyond policy and systems-building. At Start Early, we use Human-Centered Design (HCD) to help people solve problems and build high-quality, effective early learning programs by putting those most affected by a challenge at the center of creating its solution. We use HCD to co-design products and services with families, so we can address the real-life barriers that often keep them from accessing the resources they need.

Start Early's Early Learning Lab gathers lived experiences in creative ways through interviews, social media listening, even small activist networks to uncover the why behind challenges. "We empower partners to do their own research," Alexandria said. "They learn to interview, observe and synthesize so the insights are actionable, not just a report that sits on a shelf."

One recent project in Fresno, CA led by the Early Learning Lab showed the power of this approach. Local early childhood leaders were proud to have secured funding and built **Lighthouse for Children**, a beautiful community space in downtown that offers access to experts and high-quality services for families of young children.

But they were puzzled to find that families were not coming. By diving deep with families, the team discovered a simple but critical obstacle: parking tickets and inconvenient physical access to the site. "Families were getting fined just for visiting," Alexandria recalled. Equipped with that insight, the team prototyped tangible fixes, advocating for free parking zones, distributing parking passes and exploring partnerships to offset costs so more families are able to access the services.

Co-creation doesn't just generate solutions, it builds empathy. Weekly sessions brought families, staff and child care directors together to "pull the curtain back" on each other's realities, fostering understanding and shared ownership.

"Human-Centered Design lets families and educators be key players," Alexandria said. "They don't just advise, they design. That's how we move from ideas to prototypes to real change."



**"Families and educators don't just advise, they design."**

---

— Alexandria Desiga, Human-Centered Designer

## HIGHLIGHTS

### National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE)

On behalf of the Administration for Children and Families, Start Early leads the NCPFCE, providing training and technical assistance to build capacity and to strengthen Head Start professionals' relationship-based practices that support families.



# 11,000+

Professionals participated in national and regional training opportunities.



# 2,800+

Attendees gathered for the *Family Services Workforce Institute 2025*, NCPFCE's signature event.



# 6,729

Professionals supported in earning CEUs with the release of **12 new resources**, including **five online courses**.



### Institute for Home Visiting Workforce Development and Jackie Walorski Center for Evidence-Based Case Management

Launched under Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) funding with national partners to retain and strengthen the home visiting workforce.

- Start Early co-led the Professional Development workstream, helping update the national core competency framework and creating new professional development plan templates.
- Supported leadership development and supervisory growth through **2 national communities of practice**.
- Ensuring every home visitor is equipped to deliver high-quality, evidence-based services to families.
- Conducted field engagement activities with **over 150 home visitors and supervisors** to elevate field expertise and strengthen leadership across programs.





## Healthy Births & Thriving Families





The earliest days of a child's life shape every day that follows. We work with families before, during and after birth to ensure they have the resources, relationships and resilience to give their child the best possible start. From doulas and home visiting to mental health supports and family-led policy change, our goal is simple, healthy beginnings that lead to thriving futures.



# SUPPORTING FAMILIES FROM DAY ONE

Many families face complex challenges, financial pressures, housing instability, mental and physical health conditions and other stressors that can impact a child's earliest experiences.

Start Early meets these needs through prioritizing the first five years with a holistic, family-centered approach, bringing together home visitors, early learning professionals and family support workers as a coordinated team around each child. Together, they strengthen families' resilience, nurture well-being and lay the foundation for lifelong success.

Our prenatal-to-5 programs recognize that the mental health of parents is central to healthy development of children. Through thoughtfully designed practices, trained therapists partner with home visitors to identify and treat postpartum depression early, ensuring parents receive timely, culturally responsive care. For example, in Stephenson County, Illinois, a home visitor's careful screening led a new mother to life-changing support, even when her screening didn't meet the traditional threshold, reminding us of the impact a trusted relationship and proactive intervention can make. In Mt. Vernon, Illinois, a young mother named Arike overcame postpartum depression, secured stable employment

and built a brighter future for her baby with the combined support of her home visitor and therapist.

We also reach families facing extraordinary barriers. Through home visiting for families experiencing homelessness, Start Early delivers critical early learning and parenting supports to a population that has historically lacked access to such services. Since the program's inception, more than 250 unhoused families have received high-quality services, proving that with the right model, all children and all parents can thrive.

Start Early's comprehensive family-centered approach ensures that parents are never alone. By surrounding families with coordinated care and trusted relationships, we give babies the healthiest possible start, and families the foundation to flourish.

**250+**

Unhoused families have received high-quality services

**4,073**

Children served through Head Start and Home Visiting & Doula Network







## HIGHLIGHTS

### Reaching Families in Crisis

Start Early's innovative pilot programs in Illinois meet families where they are, addressing the toughest challenges of early parenthood:

#### Families Experiencing Homelessness

Expanding pilot programs that provide intensive home visiting and responsive care for pregnant people and families with young children experiencing homelessness.

- **250+ Families** experiencing homelessness have received Start Early home visiting services since the program's launch.
- **65 Families served** in FY 2025 alone through our homeless home visiting pilot.

#### Inclusion Pilot: Meeting Children's Needs in Real Time

Over the last two years, Chicago's five Head Start recipients and **Chicago Public Schools** partnered to develop, implement, assess and institutionalize feasible strategies and approaches for delivering special education services to children with disabilities or developmental delays within Head Start programs in which they are enrolled.

- **74 children** served over two years.
- Developed strategies that can be scaled citywide to ensure children with disabilities receive timely, high-quality services.



### Mental Health Services: Moving Beyond Depression

- Evidence-based home visiting model piloted across Start Early's **Home Visiting & Doula Network** to identify and treat maternal depression.



- **Expected to reach 150+ parents** over the next two years, strengthening mothers' ability to care for their children and themselves.
- **117 mothers** served by Moving Beyond Depression sessions in FY 2025, with **97% reporting improved mental health.**
- Builds capacity across a **28-program statewide network** serving families facing extreme poverty, homelessness or food insecurity.

## Early Head Start Network Providing Results for Families

- **2,228 children and families served** across Chicago through community-based partnerships.
- Children in our programs consistently **meet or exceed developmental expectations, surpassing our 75% goal.**
- Families gain connections to employment, education, housing and legal resources that promote long-term stability.

Outcomes include:

- **High prenatal care and health insurance** rates for mothers.
- **High immunization and developmental screening** rates for children.
- **Strong parent-child interactions**, including reading and singing to your child.

## National Home Visiting Summit

Our annual conference brings together early childhood leaders from across the country, uniting advocates, researchers and policymakers to advance family-focused early childhood policy.

- **1,000+ leaders** convened in Washington, D.C. to re-imagine early childhood systems.
- **100 advocates participated in hill visits** which contributed to the successful reauthorization of Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV), doubling federal home visiting funding over five years, increasing it to **\$800 million** by FY 2027.

## A Year Deep in the Community

Over the past year, **Start Early Washington** has strengthened our standing as a champion for high-quality early learning that is broadly accessible and culturally responsive, reflecting the diverse needs of families across Washington.

We expanded opportunities for professional growth and collaboration across the home visiting workforce, hosting statewide **Professional Development Days**, a **Home Visiting Coordinators Retreat** and participating in national conferences. Nearly **1,024 technical assistance and training events reached 451 professionals across 61 programs statewide.**

Broadly accessible and culturally responsive practice remains at the heart of our approach. We translated the **Washington State Home Visiting Core Competencies** into five languages, supporting a diverse workforce and redesigned our **NEAR training**, shifting toward trauma-informed, culturally grounded care that honors family histories and experiences.

To further center community leadership, we launched the Community Advisory Committee, convening seven partner organizations, to provide strategic guidance on policy and programming. In tandem, Tribal Early Learning Community Conversations deepened understanding of culturally specific needs, informing co-developed recommendations with Tribal partners.



The Summit was instrumental in driving the message home on MIECHV reauthorization.”





# LEADING ON POLICY AND PARTNERSHIPS

The First Five Years Fund (FFYF), a member of the Start Early family, has become a trusted nonpartisan voice that champions federal investment for early learning, working to expand access to high-quality child care and Head Start for children and families nationwide.

Through FFYF's continued advocacy, there was significant forward momentum in Congress in the child care and early learning space.

Congress made permanent enhancements to three child care-related tax provisions that help make child care more accessible and affordable:

- Expanded the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC)
- Improved the Employer-Provided Child Care Credit (45F)
- Grew Dependent Care Assistance Plans (DCAP)

As a result:

## 285

**Total Members of the House and Senate** signed six Dear Colleague letters supporting increased investment in the federal early learning and care programs.

## \$16 Billion

Together, these make up a \$16 billion federal investment in child care.

## 4 Million

As many as 4 million families could see increased CDCTC benefit.



# OUR GENEROUS DONORS

## Lifetime Giving

Start Early honors its Lifetime donors, who have committed to multi-year and single-time gifts.

### \$10,000,000 & Above

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## Honoring Deborah Daro

August 1, 1949—August 18, 2025



**FOR OVER 25 YEARS**, Deborah (Deb) Daro was as an active Start Early Board member with insights that reached deep into our organization. She was a senior research fellow and tenured professor at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago from 1999 until her retirement in 2023.

Deb served as the original research evaluator for Start Early's Beethoven Project, which was the inspiration to ensure that an early childhood program drove meaningful and lasting child and family outcomes which would go on to be recognized as Educare.

As a nationally recognized scholar and advocate for child-abuse prevention policies and home visiting models, Deb championed universal access to early home visits for all newborns and their parents. She firmly believed that every time a baby is born, we should ask, "How can we help?" She also recognized that the intersections between research, policy and practice must be identified and integrated for change to occur.

Her brilliant mind and compelling vision contributed so much to Start Early over the years. Deb was responsible for steering the National Home Visiting Summit to Start Early when the event's funders were looking for a new home. She served as the chair of our Program, Policy and Research committee for many years, and as a thought partner on many projects, pushed our thinking, and reminded us of our north star.

Deb was a friend, mentor and professional role model to many across the home visiting field. She balanced brilliance with humility, critical thought with kindness and she always left room in the conversation for others to join. We are grateful to have had the chance to learn and work alongside her for many years. She will truly be missed.



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