



# Expanding Early Learning in Parke County Through Collaboration



When Parke County leaders started to dive into early learning opportunities in their community, they ran into some concerning statistics. The county's kindergarten retention rate stood at 14 percent, well over the state average for children needing to repeat the grade. And of child care providers, only three in the county met the threshold of being considered high quality.

Instead of looking for a quick answer that may not be sustainable, community leaders launched a coalition. They partnered with a consulting firm to dive into ways to meaningfully improve education for children ages 0-5 in the county.

"Hearing my peers in the community talk, it is a struggle for them to find child care," said Cyndi Todd, executive director of Partnership Parke County and a coalition leader, "and I think at times people were leaning on an available family member. Somebody taking care of the child care landscape, as a system that people could engage in, was kind of non-existent."



Through her work in economic development, Todd knew that access to high-quality child care can affect many facets of a community's quality of life. In Parke County, just over one-half of young children need care because their parents are in the workforce. Yet, just over one-third (37 percent) of the county's children under the age of 6 are enrolled in a known program.

From the first coalition meeting in December 2021, where local government, employers, early childhood programs, parents, school leaders and nonprofit organizations got together to start diving into the issue, to today huge strides have been made in forming a strategic plan to determine next steps in boosting early childhood education. Coalition members are currently seeking funding to hire a coordinator to help implement the plan.

"The coalition meetings were very interesting, and they brought people together who had never really interacted before," Todd said. "What was most interesting for me was to sit back and watch the school superintendent interact with a child care provider and different agencies - with the shared mission of 'we're here to help.'"



The next steps for the coalition are to promote their work to the community and brand their program to emphasize that Parke County is truly trying to create a “hub” for early child care, with one central contact for families who are seeking education. Through the work, one of the county’s school corporations has gained more interest in pursuing adding a preschool program as a result of the coalition’s discussions. Due to school consolidations, it is possible space can be found in an existing school building. Coalition leaders hope an expansion in the K-12 space will help move the target on lowering the kindergarten retention rate and add to the already-established preschool program in the county’s other school district. They also hope the coalition’s creation of a better supported network of child care opportunities will help employers with employee attraction and productivity.



“It is a big thing to tackle, but if somebody doesn’t take the reins and start to look at it, you won’t know the answer. The tendency is to think that the schools will figure it out. But for young parents, I tend to think of things holistically and through the county. If we want to do our best job in business attraction and for our schools, the county will never change unless we change this.”

**Cyndi Todd**, Executive Director of Partnership Parke County and a coalition leader