

# Itasca Project First 1,000 Days Report: **When it Matters Most**

March 2021



*ITASCAproject*

**Early childhood development is critical to the region's future.** Supporting families, particularly ones with the youngest children, will have significant impact on the Minneapolis-St. Paul region. Investing in the over 100,000 families with children three years and younger has economic and societal benefits today and in the decades ahead – particularly for the most vulnerable – and will work to reduce the racial inequalities historically present in our region.

A cross-sector alliance of employers, the Itasca Project seeks to increase the economic competitiveness of the Minneapolis-St. Paul region and expand prosperity for all. While focusing on a variety of topics to address the long-term drivers of inclusive economic growth, supporting healthy early childhood development represents one of our greatest opportunities.

Research has deepened our understanding of the development of the human brain during the first 1,000 days of a child's life—from prenatal to age three—and the implications of that development for the rest of the child's life. How the brain develops during those formative years is largely based on external experiences that can help or hinder development. Often families of color and low-income families face the highest barriers to healthy brain development that can translate into inequities in economic, educational, and health outcomes.

Of the stakeholders who support families and young children, while often overlooked, **employers have an important role to play.** Employers who implement family-friendly policies and practices can increase employee satisfaction, productivity, and retention, while decreasing absenteeism and healthcare costs.

Research has also shown that investments in early childhood development produce an annual return on investment (ROI) of 7-10% by improving school and career achievement and reducing costs for remedial education, health care, and the criminal justice system. For the children most at-risk, that return may exceed 13%. These returns exceed typical stock market returns, suggesting private and public investment to support the development of young children's capacities could increase both equity and efficiency.<sup>1</sup>

However, current public and private spending on children ages 0-3 is only a fraction of children in K-12.

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic fallout, coupled with the social unrest after George Floyd was killed, have highlighted the inequities that families in the region face. The pandemic has also exacerbated the challenges for families, particularly low-income families, to access and afford quality childcare—a critical factor in overall early childhood development and parents' ability to return to work. Early evidence of the economic recovery also shows that it is uneven and disproportionately hard on families with low income and families of color, which will exacerbate inequalities. While creating challenges, **the pandemic also presents a unique opportunity for all of us to think differently.**

The urgency of investing in early childhood development has never been greater. Employers can provide important support to families and young children by:

- **Sharing the story of early childhood development**
- **Adopting family-friendly policies, practices, and resources** to support employees and their children
- **Supporting advocates for increased funding and better service delivery** for families in greatest need



# The Itasca Project and the Focus on Early Childhood Development

The Minneapolis-St. Paul region is home to over three million people, 16 Fortune 500 businesses, world-class universities and colleges, renowned park systems, and a vibrant cultural scene. Over the past decades, the region has enjoyed steady growth and a high quality of life, supported by an infrastructure of opportunity driven by our region's talent.

Our continued growth and success require supporting our current workforce and investing in the future, especially the future of our children. Over 100,000 area families have children age 3 or younger. **Employers who support employees and their children are investing in the Minneapolis-St Paul region's future success, as well as making a smart business decision.** These employers will enjoy higher employee retention, satisfaction, and productivity as well as lower absenteeism and healthcare costs.

Research by Professor James Heckman (University of Chicago) and by Art Rolnick and Rob Gruenwald of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve has shown that investment in early childhood development leads to success in school and life for all children. For children at risk, investment also reduces long-term social costs.

The latest neuroscience research proves that 80% of healthy brain architecture is established in the first 1,000 days of life—the first three years. The importance of healthy brain architecture cannot be overemphasized. The influences in those initial three years will affect the rest of the child's life—health, ability to learn, ability to function in the community, and economic success.

Each year, 34,000 families in our region have a child. These families do not have equal resources or support, particularly during pregnancy and those first 1,000 days. Given how the brain develops, this early inequity fuels gaps in education, healthcare and economic security. Increasing equity is a complex endeavor that requires many stakeholders working together. It also requires a clear focus on addressing the historic and systemic drivers of racial and income inequity in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region.

Enter the Itasca Project. This alliance of more than 70 leaders in the business, philanthropic, and public sectors seeks to increase the economic competitiveness of our region and expand prosperity for all.

In October 2019, Itasca convened a small task force of members to better understand the latest science of brain development during the first 1,000 days, investigate the challenges families with young children face during this critical period, and identify how the Itasca Project can help children and families.

The task force, informed by scientific and academic research on early brain development, identified opportunities to better support families and young children in our region. They also highlighted the great work that community-based organizations have been doing for decades that should be spotlighted, supported, and scaled up.

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic fallout, coupled with the social unrest after the death of George Floyd, has further highlighted the inequities that families in the region face. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted the health of children of color. Analysis from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has shown that of the more than 390,000 cases and 121 adolescent COVID-19 deaths, nearly 80% impacted children of color.<sup>2</sup>

The pandemic has also exacerbated the challenges for families, especially families that are low income or low socioeconomic status, in accessing and affording quality childcare—a critical factor in early childhood development and in parents' ability to return to work. While creating challenges, the pandemic also presents a unique opportunity for all of us to think differently.

Itasca seeks to build a community of employers to support the health and well-being of our region's workforce today and tomorrow. The urgency of investing in early childhood development—specifically the first 1,000 days—has never been greater.

# Why the First 1,000 Days Matter



Children’s earliest experiences affect their ability to fully realize their potential. Nutrition, healthcare, parenting, environmental safety, among other experiences, physically shape the connections in the brain.

In the first 1,000 days, the basic architecture of the brain is rapidly building itself based on the experiences the child has and what the brain has to think about. Is the baby fed when hungry? Comforted when upset? Engaged when alert? These experiences stimulate brain pathways and connections and determine which connections stay and which die away.

The brain is literally connecting millions of neural pathways. During this the first 1,000 days, the brain is very plastic or able to change; it changes and rewires itself, making this time period a critical time for intervention and treatment, as well as development. The brain architecture being built in these first 1,000 days is the foundation for higher-level processing that happens later.

Joint research by the University of Minnesota and the University of North Carolina is using advanced imaging technologies to develop the Baby Connectome—a specific map of neural connections and their evolution. The research shows that as children get older their brains become less plastic, as many of the foundational pathways for vision, hearing, language, emotion, and attention have already been laid down. By age 4 or 5, there is still significant brain development to come, but it will be profoundly affected by the foundational architecture already established.

Optimal early brain development requires proper nutrition and healthcare for both mothers and children. Additionally, infants and toddlers need stimulation and interaction with their parents and other caregivers.

This “serve and return” interaction helps stimulate the young brain:

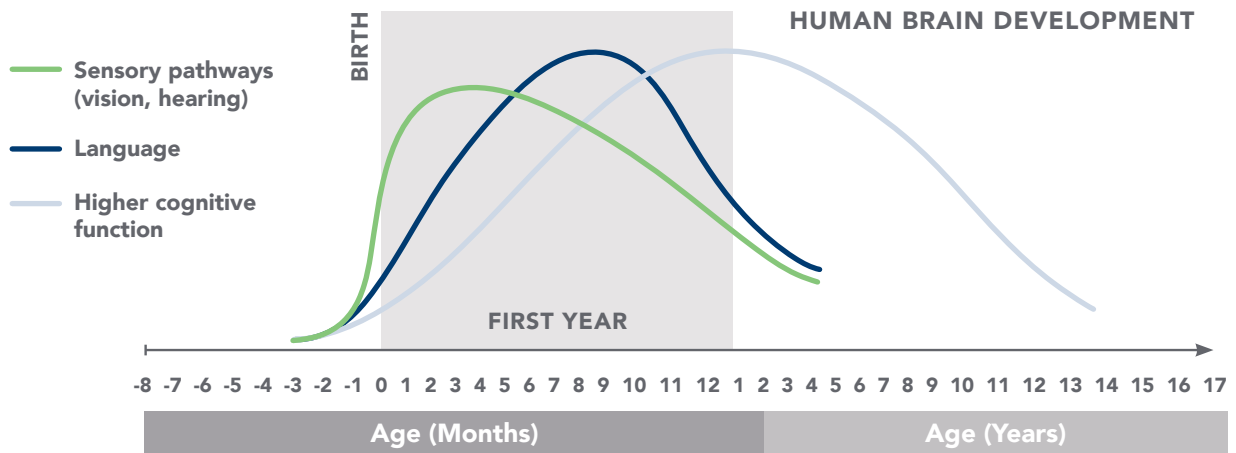
“When an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, and an adult responds appropriately with eye contact, words, or a hug, neural connections are built and strengthened in the child’s brain that support the development of communication and social skills. Much like a lively game of tennis, volleyball, or ping-pong, this back-and-forth is both fun and capacity-building. When caregivers are sensitive and responsive to a young child’s signals and needs, they provide an environment rich in serve and return experiences.”<sup>3</sup>

Building neural pathways begins very early (Exhibit A). Sensory functions start to develop before birth; language development begins in the first year, followed soon after by higher cognitive functions.

This progression requires providing the right conditions for development at the right times and avoiding conditions that hinder brain development. There is no do-over for the first 1,000 days.



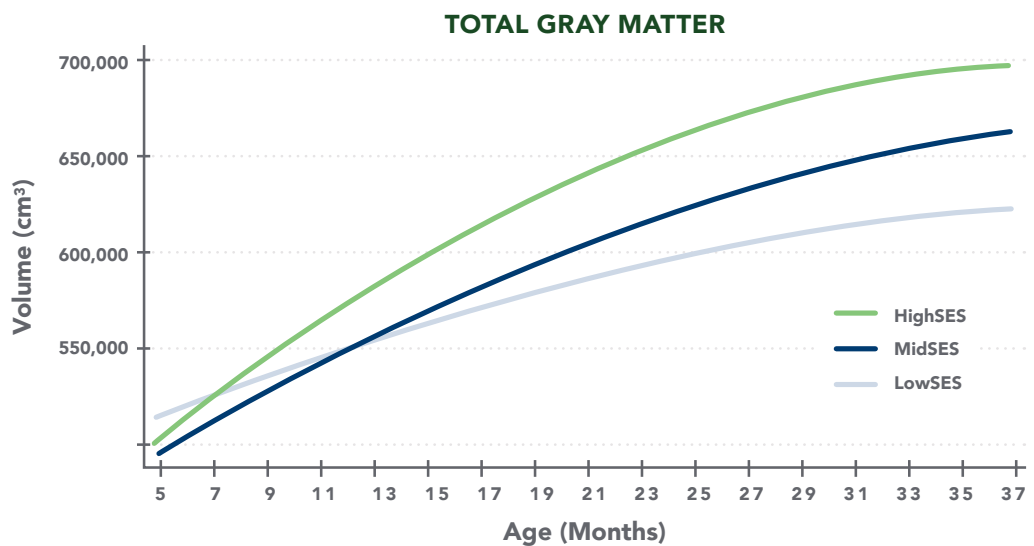
## Exhibit A



For example, neuroscience research has shown that stress negatively affects brain development. Financial and food insecurity, housing instability, and exposure to violence are common sources of stress for children and families of low socioeconomic status that have proven impact on brain development. These adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can be found in nearly one in six adults, and are linked directly to negative outcomes later in life, including an increased risk of obesity, heart disease, and depression. According to the CDC, researchers estimate that up to 1.9 million cases of heart disease and 21 million cases of depression could be avoided by preventing ACEs. Interventions can dramatically change the trajectory of a child’s development, as well as the societal impact that manifest from exposure to ACEs.

Exhibit B shows the positive correlation between Socio Economic Status (SES) and total gray matter in the brain. Gray matter contains most of the brain’s neurotransmitters, which support the processing of information and execution of actions. Lower SES is associated with lower total gray matter and lower total gray matter volume is associated with behavioral problems such as rule breaking, excessive aggression, and hyperactivity by age 4. Later in life, lower gray matter is associated with higher risk for mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety. The number of ACEs a child is exposed to early in life can contribute to which SES trajectory they follow.

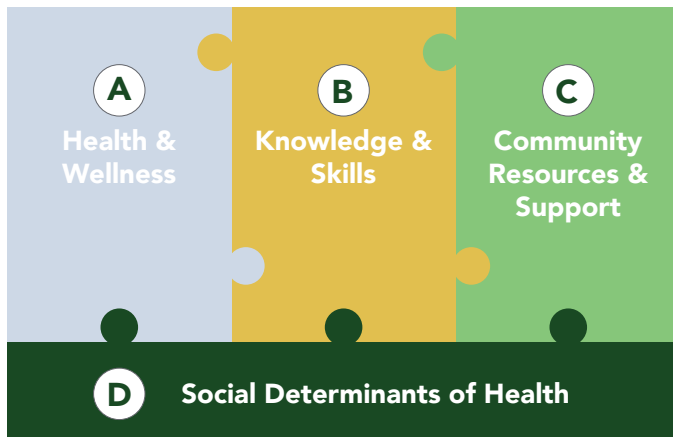
## Exhibit B<sup>4</sup>



# How to Make the Most of the First 1,000 Days

The Itasca Project has defined four major factors in optimal brain development during those first 1,000 days that offer opportunities for intervention: health & wellness, knowledge and skills, community resources and support, and social determinants of health (Exhibit C).

## Exhibit C



- A** Healthcare and age appropriate nutrition for child and parents, includes mental and emotional support.
- B** Learning principles to stimulate and support brain development.
- C** Resources for parents and caregivers, including informal sources like peer mothers and family and formal sources like high quality childcare.
- D** Foundational elements for children and families including steady housing, financial stability, food security, safety, reduction/elimination of pollution and toxins from ambient environment, etc.

**Health & Wellness.** Since healthy brain development begins during pregnancy, access to prenatal care and adequate nutrition is critical. In Minnesota, one in five pregnant women does not receive adequate prenatal care—for Black and Indigenous women those rates are 38% and 51% respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Adequate infant nutrition is also critical. Studies have shown that inadequate iron consumption has a negative impact on brain development. Some research has found a correlation between breastfeeding and later academic success. Factors like a mother's health, income, and family and cultural support influence breastfeeding rates.

Parents' mental and emotional health also affects brain development. Almost one in 10 new mothers in Minnesota experiences postpartum depression, which can affect her interactions with her baby. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, some cultural communities report rates of depression more than twice the overall average.<sup>5</sup>

*Opportunities: Ensure all families have access to prenatal care, increase pregnant mother and infant nutrition, create conditions that encourage breastfeeding and expand support for parent mental and emotional health.*

**Knowledge & Skills.** All parents want a strong start and bright future for their child—they want to be the best parent possible. Research shows that most parents do not realize the moments of connection and interactions in those first 1,000 days have a tremendous and lasting impact on their child's future.

Among those who *do* know of the lifelong impact, more than half of them find this fact terrifying. They need actionable, positive parenting strategies to alleviate this fear. And research shows they are open to learning more: almost 70% want to better understand positive parenting strategies and say they would use them. Half reported wanting to know specifically about brain development.<sup>6</sup>

When parents know the impact of talking, reading, and singing on brain development, behavior changes. In California, nearly 74% of parents who recalled seeing a talk-read-sing TV or radio ad said the ads led them to talk, read, and sing more with their child.

Itasca Project nonprofit partners (see appendix) have great success with their parent engagement efforts.

*Opportunities: Provide parent education and training, deploy electronic communication to reinforce good habits, and expand home visiting and support.*

**Community Resources & Support.** Before COVID-19, the Minneapolis-St. Paul region had a critical and growing shortfall of high-quality childcare—demand outpaced supply by 38%—and the cost of care ranked the third highest in the nation. Lack of public funding left almost 60% of eligible families in Minnesota without much-needed childcare subsidies. A March 2020 Think Small survey found that closed childcare programs cut capacity about 19% (since just over half of the programs surveyed responded, the supply shortage is likely may be more severe).<sup>7,8,9</sup>

Lack of childcare is one of the biggest issues for parents of young children struggling to hold a steady job or even to work at all. In the US, 75% of mothers and 50% of fathers say they have passed up employment opportunities, switched jobs, or quit work to care for their children. COVID-19 has exacerbated this issue, particularly for women who reported leaving the workforce in higher rates than men.<sup>10</sup>

The families that are most vulnerable face the greatest childcare challenges. In a spring 2020 national survey, 48% of low-income parents said that they will not be able to resume childcare due to loss of income, lack of transportation, or other factors; 25% of middle- and upper-income families said the same.<sup>11</sup>

The University of Minnesota, a national leader in early childhood development research and outcomes, is well-positioned to become a Center for Excellence in this field with the opening of the Masonic Institute for the Developing Brain in October 2021, bringing together a broad range of expertise in early childhood brain development to create new resources for our community and elevate the existing network of community partners by creating a positive feedback loop between partners and researchers.

*Opportunities: Increase available higher-quality childcare and funding for childcare scholarships and subsidies to expand affordability; elevate early childhood education ecosystem through partnerships with the University of Minnesota.*

**Social Determinants of Health.** Many nonclinical, environmental factors like stress on the family, ambient pollution, and community safety play roles in stimulating or inhibiting brain development. Environment can even impact DNA, switching genetic factors “on” or “off.”

Stress on the family is prevalent in Minnesota: where 43% of births happen in families on Medicaid, and almost one in five young children in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region has changed residences at least once in the last year. These stresses not only inhibit healthy brain development in children, but also create barriers for a stable and productive workforce.<sup>5</sup>

Children in different socioeconomic groups display dramatic differences in vocabularies at 18 months. By two years, the disparity in vocabulary development has grown significantly. This matters because one of the biggest indicators of whether or not you graduate from high school is how many words you know by age 5. One of the biggest determinants of future adult health is whether you graduated from high school. It’s all connected.

*Opportunities: Create jobs with family-sustaining wages, expand job training and placement for low-income workers, provide low-cost housing, ensure healthy food supply, and encourage family-friendly practices in the workplace.*

These four factors are mutually reinforcing and require stakeholder action.



# Historical Impacts of Racial Injustice within Early Learning

Minnesota's youngest children of color (prenatal to 5 years old) have been disproportionately impacted by poverty, and legislative policy decisions and early childhood systems that lack cultural relevance and competency.

Minnesota often ranks in the top five states in the country when looking at health and education outcomes for young children. As we now know, a more careful look at the data reveals large disparities in those outcomes between children of color and white children in our region and state.

The majority of children of color in Minnesota are growing up in low-income households and are negatively impacted by a complex web of economic challenges, systemic barriers, and consistent experiences of implicit bias. Unstable housing, low-wage jobs, and limited access to healthcare all conspire to harm and/or limit the social, emotional, and educational development of young children of color.

Legislative policy and funding decisions can and do have long-term consequences for children of color. For example, in 2003 during an economic downturn, the Minnesota legislature reduced funding to Minnesota's sliding fee childcare program (CCAP) by \$100M per year and capped the reimbursement rates for childcare providers at the 2003 rate. For nearly 20 years, the Minnesota legislature neglected to reinstate this funding, resulting in more than 10,000 children per year (68% of whom were children of color) being denied access to quality childcare due to lack of funds.

Additionally, capping the CCAP reimbursement rates (now at 20% of the statewide average cost of childcare) has forced many providers to leave the field or to just stop serving Minnesota's most vulnerable children all together.

Early learning teacher and provider training programs are struggling to meet the needs/demands of Minnesota's rapidly changing demographics. Our state continues to struggle in recruiting and retaining teachers/providers of color. Early learning models/

curriculums are often Eurocentric and are not relevant in preparing new providers to effectively teach across a broad range of cultural communities. In addition, early learning training programs are moving too slowly to address issues of implicit bias, which is negatively affecting children's outcomes and leading to a disproportionate number of children of color being suspended or expelled from preschools.

Important next steps to consider:

- Encourage the use of a racial equity lens when developing legislative early learning policy and funding proposals to assure that new programs/funding are intentionally designed to effectively serve children of color and to minimize unintended negative consequences.
- Support that works. Minnesota has some exceptional nonprofit early learning programs – consistently beating the odds and sending low-income children of color to kindergarten fully prepared and ready to succeed. We need to increase public funding and move more low-income children off wait lists and into effective early learning programs.
- Push forward efforts to ensure early learning program models/curriculums are more culturally relevant and effective for children of color.





While Minneapolis-St Paul typically do better than the national average, there are opportunities for improvement to ensure all of the ~34,000 children born each year in our region enjoy health development and build their foundation for a bright future.

### Health & Wellness

- **21%** of births lack adequate prenatal care – *representing approximately 7,200 births in Minneapolis-St Paul*
  - Those rates are **38%** for Black families and **51%** for Indigenous families
- **37%** of Minnesotans reported some level of food insecurity in July 2020
  - Black and Hispanic/Latino Minnesotans reported food insecurity at more than double the rate of white residents
  - Only **59%** of eligible Children under age 6 are served by the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
- **One in eleven** new mothers in Minnesota experience postpartum depression
  - Black and Indigenous mothers were **more than twice as likely** to report depression compared with all mothers

### Knowledge & Skills

- **49%** of all families read to their child every day
- **51%** of children receive a developmental screening – critical to early identification of health and learning challenges

### Community Resources & Support

- **58%** of eligible families do not receive a childcare subsidy due to lack of public funding
- There is a shortfall of **38%** – nearly 46,000 – between number of children under 6 that can be served by childcare providers and what is needed in Minneapolis-St Paul

### Social Determinants of Health

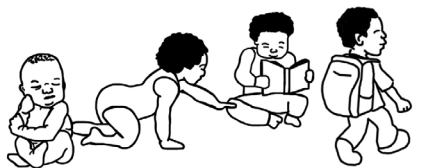
- Nearly **75%** of births are to working mothers – one of the highest rates in the nation
  - **Nearly a third of births** are to families making below \$50,000 per year\*
- **19%** of children under the age of 6 changed residences at least once in past year – *approximately 38,000 children*
- **9%** of children have two or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
  - **Twice the rate** of children from families with low income have two or more ACEs

Based on analysis of Minnesota Early Childhood Risk, Reach, and Resilience: Key Indicators of Early Childhood Development in Minnesota, Wilder Research, 2018, [https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/MNEarlyChildhoodRiskReachResilience\\_9-18.pdf](https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/MNEarlyChildhoodRiskReachResilience_9-18.pdf)

\*\$50,000 per year is approximately 200% the federal poverty level

# Approaches that Work when it Matters Most

The Minneapolis-St Paul region is fortunate to have a strong nonprofit sector, particularly in the early childhood development space that advocates for and serves families with low income and families of color. In developing the First 1,000 Days report, the Itasca Project partnered with nonprofit leaders who guided our findings, approach, and recommendations. The community-based organizations featured below have been achieving strong results for young children through parent engagement and education, advocacy, and implementation and awareness building of successful interventions.



**Wilder African American Babies Coalition & Projects**

Amherst H. Wilder Foundation African American Babies Coalition (AABC) is a coalition of African American community leaders and allies committed to addressing the achievement gap and improving health outcomes by translating brain development and healthy child development practices into family and community life.



**Greater Twin Cities United Way**

United Way 80 x 3 initiative will increase local early childhood provider capacity to deliver trauma-sensitive care in order to buffer the impacts of adverse childhood experiences so all our children can flourish. United Way will partner with early care and parent engagement providers to expand best-known practices for infants and toddlers – providing funding, access to a peer network, and amplification of what works.



The NAZ Early Childhood strategy is designed to prepare scholars for kindergarten beginning prenatally. Kindergarten readiness is achieved by providing children access to 4-star rated early learning programs through scholarships, implementation and evaluation of developmental assessments, and parent education classes. Families and scholars are supported by a designated Family Coach in partnership with NAZ anchor partners to address the needs of the whole family.



Way to Grow's programming builds a supportive educational pipeline for children from birth through age 8. Families are paired with highly trained program staff, called Family Educators, to provide in-depth, evidence-based, in-home education and support. There is a focus on populations and communities with risk factors associated with low school achievement, including those who have traditionally experienced high rates of poverty, and less optimal maternal care, birth, and infant health outcomes.

NOTE: additional details are in the appendix.

# Impact of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Development

The COVID-19 pandemic has created far-reaching consequences for parts of society, in particular families with young children. Along with the health impacts, the pandemic has had near-term negative economic impacts and potential long-term social impacts. Families of color and families with low incomes seem to be the most adversely affected.

While the long-term health impacts of COVID-19 are still emerging, the inequities in health outcomes are already visible. A national analysis from the CDC showed that the more than 390,000 cases and among 121 adolescent COVID-19 deaths, nearly 80% were children of color.<sup>2</sup>

As the unemployment in Minnesota rose to 8.1% in April 2020, an increase of 180% in two months, many families' financial situations became increasingly unstable. Increased financial distress has led to rises in food insecurity and housing instability. As parents with young children begin to return to work, access

and affordability of childcare has become a significant barrier. A national survey indicated that 48% of low-income parents will not be able to return to their childcare due to loss of income, lack of transportation and other factors; 25% of middle- and upper-income families said the same.<sup>11</sup>

While the near-term health and economic impacts are critical, the long-term consequences could be equally significant. The pandemic has created ongoing stress for families and children—a known inhibitor for healthy brain development. Early evidence of the economic recovery also shows that it is uneven and disproportionately hard on families with low income and families of color. Existing achievement gaps in learning will expand due to inequitable access to quality childcare and virtual learning resources and tools such as high-speed broadband.

All of these factors will exacerbate prevailing racial and economic inequities in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region.

## Why this Matters for Employers

Most mothers in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region (75%) work, and their employers stand to benefit from supporting their efforts to give their children a strong start in life.

Employers who help parents better balance work and family life enjoy higher attraction and retention rates: 75% of mothers in the US and 50% of fathers say that they have passed up work opportunities, switched jobs, or stopped working to care for their children.<sup>10</sup> Almost 40% of parents nationwide report leaving a job because it lacked flexibility.<sup>12</sup>

Family-friendly practices can decrease employer healthcare costs and employee absences, and increase employee productivity and morale in the short term. Nationwide, 33% of families with young children spend more than 20% of their household income on childcare. This cost burden creates tremendous stress. In a 2016 national survey of human resources leaders<sup>14</sup>,



71% said that paid family leave has a positive impact on productivity, and 82% reported higher employee morale.<sup>14</sup> In the long term, successful early childhood development programs and awareness could lead to a decrease in ACEs across the board, and a more capable, healthy workforce that presents less of a drain on employers in the form of sick days and insurance costs.

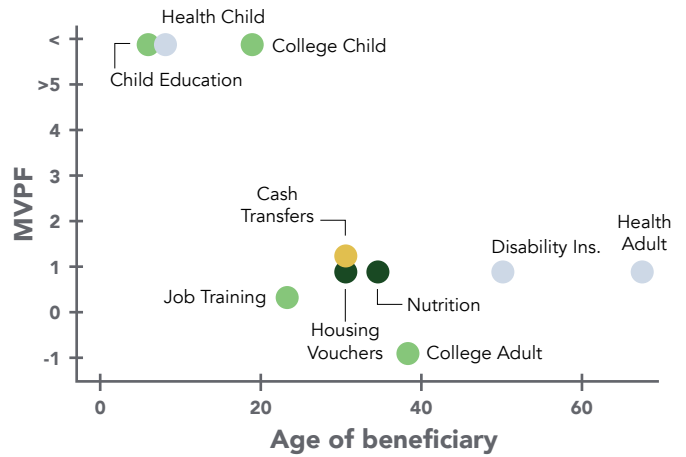
James Heckman's research on the economic impact of investing in early childhood development and learning programs suggests that in best practice, the earlier the investment, the higher the return. Specifically, Heckman's analysis of the Perry Preschool program shows an annual ROI of 7-10% based on increased school and career achievement and decreased spending on remedial education, health, and the criminal justice system. His most recent research analyzed Abecedarian/CARE's comprehensive,

high-quality, birth-to-5 early childhood programs for disadvantaged children and found an annual ROI of 13% per child, thanks to better educational, economic, health, and social outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

A more holistic analysis of the marginal value of public funds (MVPF) has indicated that compared with other publicly funded programs, subsidies, and supports, early child education has very high returns<sup>14</sup> (Exhibit D).

However, current public spending for children ages 0-2 is ~\$650 per capita, and children ages 3-4 is ~\$2,250. Compare that to the up to ~\$10,000 per capita for a child in K-12<sup>16</sup>. While an effective and well-funded K-12 system is vital for the region, employers could play an important role by advocating for additional investments in programs that support our youngest children.

### Exhibit D<sup>15</sup>



## How to Support the First 1,000 Days

The Itasca Project has identified three ways that employers can help address the challenges facing our region’s youngest children and families:

**Share the story of the first 1,000 days.** Share the research on how important the first 1,000 days are to a child’s future and in turn, the future success of our region. Join us in support of Little Moments Count, a social movement to help parents, caregivers, and the community understand the importance of talking, playing, reading, and singing with infants and toddlers given the impact on brain development.

[littlemomentscount.org/employer-resources](http://littlemomentscount.org/employer-resources)



**Adopt our employer toolkit.** In 2021, the Itasca task force is developing and piloting a toolkit of policies, practices, and resources for employers of all sizes and industries to help employees and their children overcome health and wellness challenges and to



support new parents. Please contact Justin Freiberg ([justin\\_freiberg@mckinsey.com](mailto:justin_freiberg@mckinsey.com)) if you want more details about this toolkit or would like to participate in the pilot.

**Support advocates for improved service delivery.** In 2021, the task force will join a coalition of our early childhood development and learning partners to help public and private organizations better serve the families with the greatest needs. This coalition expects to focus on promoting ideas to:

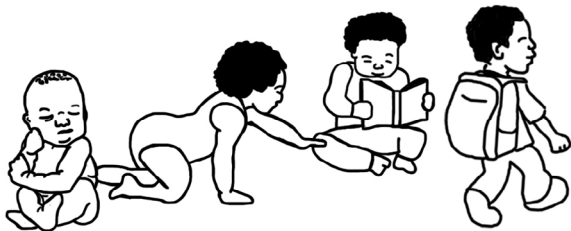
- *Invest private and public funds in scaling up current providers and initiatives.* Our region has many providers and initiatives that address challenges ranging from access to adequate prenatal care, to increasing food security, to new parent coaching and home visits. Employers can support these organizations to expand their reach and impact with investments of resources, time, and volunteers.
- *Increase childcare capacity.* Most families struggle to find and pay for quality childcare; families that are low income struggle the most. Employers can

support scholarship programs to increase access to high-quality childcare for families that are low income.

- *Support public sector leaders' focus on streamlining and improving public programs that deliver services to young children and families.* Employers can support efforts to increase efficiency, as well as efforts to increase public funds for direct services for families like nutrition, healthcare and housing.

Please contact Justin Freiberg ([justin\\_freiberg@mckinsey.com](mailto:justin_freiberg@mckinsey.com)) if you or your organization is interested in participating in this coalition.

## Appendix – Nonprofit Partners Highlights



### Wilder African American Babies Coalition & Projects

AABC is a coalition of African American community leaders and allies committed to addressing the achievement gap and improving health outcomes by translating brain development and healthy child development practices into family and community life.

The coalition has been essential to the African American community in Minnesota by focusing on

“what makes us sick and how do we help families heal looking at traditional messaging, behaviors, and historical trauma.” Partners provide overall technical community support and engagement addressing systemic racial health disparities, specifically adverse birth outcomes related to prematurity and low birth weight in the African American communities.

AABC has developed and launched an educational campaign for African American families focused on prenatal to three brain development. In partnership with TPT, African American Babies Coalition created a series of short videos “Brains Are Built,” which won the Upper Midwest Academy Award for public service announcements. <https://www.tpt.org/brains-are-built>

[wilder.org/community-impact/african-american-babies-coalition-and-projects](https://wilder.org/community-impact/african-american-babies-coalition-and-projects)



The NAZ Early Childhood strategy is designed to prepare scholars for kindergarten beginning prenatally. Kindergarten readiness is achieved by providing children access to 4-star rated early learning programs through scholarships, implementation, and evaluation of developmental assessments and parent education

classes. Families and scholars are supported by a designated Family Coach in partnership with NAZ anchor partners to address the needs of the whole family.

The NAZ model is unique because of the Collective Impact approach to supporting families. The collaborative nature of NAZ’s work promotes continuity across multiple sectors to provide comprehensive supports to families. Having shared goals, targets, and resources creates a framework for accelerating academic outcomes for scholars through layered programmatic strategies.

NAZ measures age-appropriate development toward kindergarten readiness using a shared assessment tool (Teaching Strategies GOLD). Data from this tool is collected three times per year and aggregated across 5 early childhood programs to assess the progress of scholars. These data are then contextualized by

factors specific to the scholars we are supporting. Our continuous improvement process allows us to make analysis and adjust strategies to meet the needs of scholars in ways that are culturally appropriate.

[northsideachievement.org](http://northsideachievement.org)



**Greater Twin Cities  
United Way**

**United Way –  
80 x 3 Initiative**  
80 percent of brain growth occurs before a child's third birthday, young children and their parents

are at a crucial time of potential, and children facing the chronic stress of poverty are most likely exposed to adverse experiences (ACEs) that can manifest as trauma, altering brain development. Trauma-sensitive practices, in care centers and at home, buffer the

impact of ACEs on children so their innate resilience and hunger to develop can flourish.

United Way 80 x 3 initiative will increase local early childhood provider capacity to deliver trauma-sensitive care in order to buffer the impacts of adverse childhood experiences so all our children can flourish. United Way will partner with early care and parent engagement providers to expand best-known practices for infants and toddlers – providing funding, access to a peer network, and amplification of what works.

[gtcuw.org/80-x-3-resilient-from-the-start/](http://gtcuw.org/80-x-3-resilient-from-the-start/)



Way to Grow's intensive home visiting model, Great By Eight, is the foundation of all programming and builds a supportive educational pipeline for children from birth through age 8. Families are paired with highly trained program staff, called Family Educators, to provide in-depth, evidence-based, in-home education and support. There is a focus on populations and communities with risk factors associated with low school achievement, including those who have traditionally experienced high rates of poverty, and less optimal maternal care, birth, and infant health outcomes.

Way to Grow provides a distinctly holistic and unique approach that marries family support and stabilization, health education, and parent engagement, with early and elementary education. The approach is uniquely

rooted in the deep cultural competence, gained over the past 30+ years. Way to Grow's Family Educators mirror families culturally and linguistically collectively speak 10 languages; 80% are people of color. The design of the staffing model and curriculum ensure culturally appropriate programs based on long-term, trusted relationships with families.

In 2019, 90% of Way to Grow children entering kindergarten were deemed ready for school, 96% of families attended a parent teacher conference, and 96% of women reported a healthy birth weight. Way to Grow's approach to early childhood education and family support programming is grounded in evidence-based philosophy and research-informed home visiting model. This model is achieving significant community impact, as reflected in a recent Benefit-Cost Analysis conducted by The Constellation Fund, which revealed that Great By Eight generates \$11.61 in community benefits for every \$1.00 invested.

[waytogrow.org](http://waytogrow.org)

In October 2019, the Itasca Project convened a small task force of members to better understand the latest science of brain development during the first 1,000 days. As part of this effort, we investigated the challenges that families with young children face during this critical period, particularly our most vulnerable families. We also considered ways employers can help. The aim of this resulting report is to help increase awareness of the critical and lifelong impact of the first 1,000 days to a child's future given our vested interest in their success.

The recommendations are based on research and analysis conducted for the Itasca Project First 1,000 Days task force. Methodology for the project included analyzing public data sources, reviewing literature and studies, interviewing experts, and benchmarking other regions. The research included interviews of more than 40 external experts, including parents, business leaders, community leaders, academic experts, and policymakers.

This report concludes the first phase of the project, which involved fact-finding and identifying opportunities. The second phase of the project—to identify partners, design programs, and advocate for and implement the identified priorities—continues through 2021 and beyond.

## About the Itasca Project

The Itasca Project is an employer-led alliance drawn together by an interest in new and better ways to address regional issues that impact our future economic competitiveness and quality of life in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region. Its 70-plus participants are primarily private-sector CEOs, public-sector leaders, and the leaders of major foundations based in the region. To learn more, please visit [theitascaproject.com](http://theitascaproject.com)

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### TASK FORCE

This higher education effort was led by a task force convened by the Itasca Project.

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Andrea Walsh	HealthPartners
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The Itasca Project would like to thank the Advisory Group members for their guidance and advice.

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