ANNUAL REPORT

Discover how we're working together and raising our voices to move Milwaukee forward.

ECE AMBASSADORS: ADVOCACY & ACTION

FOCUSING IN ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

SNEAK PEEK: OUR NEW STRATEGIC PLAN
Inside, you’ll find photos of Penfield Children’s Center and the Northside YMCA ECE Center!

Click the links or scan the QR codes found throughout the report to access bonus content!

Our talented team has grown and evolved in 2023! Thanks to their incredible work, this year has been one of the brightest yet. Meet the team now!

“This work is made possible by our dedicated partners, our extraordinary team and our shared desire to create lasting change.”

Vincent Lyles, Executive Director

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In addition, the funding we informed and helped secure over the past few years was put to use this year to support and stabilize the ECE sector (pages 4-5). For example, the City of Milwaukee’s historic $7 million American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) investment into ECE has resulted in thousands of stipends to early educators. The Accreditation Facilitation Project, which we helped secure funding for, is also well under-way, with two programs already receiving accreditation! This is an incredible step toward improving the quality of care in Milwaukee and expanding the number of high-quality slots, with hundreds of children set to benefit.

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Vincent reflects on the highlights from his first year as executive director.

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The Milwaukee Succeeds team and our colleagues at the Greater Milwaukee Foundation (GMF) are courageous, committed and convinced that by working together we can make Milwaukee greater.

We’ve set about doing that in a variety of ways, with the most important being our commitment to letting our lived experience partners guide the work. Since we aim to transform systems, it’s crucial that we involve those most impacted by these systems.

This year, our Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Youth Forward MKE Ambassadors stood up and stood out within the broader community. Whether it was our ECE Ambassadors speaking at the Joint Committee on Finance’s listening session (page 4) or our Youth Ambassadors presenting at a national youth conference, these incredible individuals provided insight, gained the courage to tell their own stories and made a lasting impression in the process.

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AMBASSADORS & ADVOCACY

How our ECE Ambassadors Learned to Raise their Voices for Change

In February, Milwaukee Succeeds welcomed its first cohort of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Ambassadors. Utilizing their lived experiences as parents, community advocates and ECE professionals, they set out to learn more about the sector, engage with the community and, ultimately, advocate for change. With major struggles currently facing the sector – from recruitment and retention challenges to skyrocketing costs of care – their work wasn’t easy. Yet through their dedication, persistence and collaboration, they’ve succeeded in supporting local providers and raising their voices for a stronger ECE system.

Building a Network
“‘The best part about this ambassadorship is really being out there engaging with all the families,’’ said Ambassador Briana Stanford. ‘You really get to hear their stories and connect.’”

The Ambassadors had plenty of engagement opportunities this year, including resource fairs, block parties, back-to-school events and more. At each, they shared their stories, spoke about the state of ECE and cultivated a list of champions eager to learn and do more. The Ambassadors are now conducting conversations with those on the list to learn more about what matters to them. They’ll use this feedback to organize trainings on ECE policy, data, grassroots organizing and the power of advocacy.

“‘This is about activating people around a common good that’s going to benefit children for decades to come,’’ said Ambassador Vanessa Giraldez.

Providing Targeted Supports
The Ambassadors have also made it a point to connect with and learn from local ECE providers. They’ve become familiar faces in various centers, both by attending partner events and helping to facilitate them. They’ve even provided targeted supports – like Teaching Strategies GOLD and Creative Curriculum trainings – to ensure educators have the best tools to teach our youngest learners.

Calling for Change
Advocating for sustained funding – particularly the continuation of Child Care Counts in the 2023-25 state budget – became a major part of the Ambassadors’ efforts. After learning about the power of their voices and the importance of their stories, they took to the stage at the Joint Committee on Finance’s Listening Session in April, painting a picture of the sector’s ongoing struggles.

Along with members of the ECE Coalition and the statewide Raising Wisconsin coalition, they succeeded in garnering over 80,000 emails to state and local legislators in support of Child Care Counts. This, combined with their sustained advocacy activities, effectively elevated ECE to one of the most prominent issues in the state.

While the request for $300 million to continue the program wasn’t included in the final budget, because of these combined efforts, Gov. Evers did designate $770 million in emergency funding to sustain Child Care Counts until June 2025.

“We can, we should and we need to have stronger early childhood education systems,’’ said Ambassador Callie Colbo.

In 2024, our ECE Ambassadors, coalition partners and dedicated team will work to continue this incredible momentum. In addition to ongoing advocacy efforts, institutional pieces (like the Wisconsin Shares research that the Ambassadors are helping to coordinate) will further bolster the sector and create meaningful change for many.

Making an Impact with Public Investments

This year, the ECE Coalition and its partners have been putting public investments into action. Take a look at how the $5 million Workforce Innovation Grant and $7 million City of Milwaukee ARPA Investment are helping strengthen the ECE workforce.

THE ACCREDITATION FACILITATION PROJECT

THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN SERVED BY THE 24 PROVIDERS

PROGRAMS ACCREDITED WITH 131 HIGH QUALITY SLOTS

18 CURRENT AMBASSADORS

2,273 TOTAL HOURS COMPLETED

389 NAMES ON THE NETWORKING LIST

WORKFORCE INNOVATION GRANT

Currently 43 individuals are participating in coursework, career counseling and wraparound supports to improve their ECE credentialling, far surpassing the initial goal of 35.

ARPA INVESTMENT

As of September, 2,805 educators had received stipends totaling over $2M. Plus, 11 high schoolers participated in dual enrollment coursework at MATC and 11 men of color fellows were placed in ECE classrooms.
A FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH

OUR YOUTH NEED MORE WHEN IT COMES TO MENTAL HEALTH.

In 2023, they called it out as part of our Design Your Future Fellowship – and they haven’t stopped calling since. Milwaukee Succeeds is listening and, together with our community partners, we’re making moves to change things for good.

A Clear Need for Support
Recent data reinforces what our young people have been saying. According to the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey by the WI Department of Public Instruction, over half of Milwaukee Public School (MPS) high school students experienced significant problems with anxiety in the past year. On top of that, 37% reported prolonged disruptive sadness, while 17% seriously considered suicide. These statistics paint a clear picture of the struggles our youth are facing – and the opportunity we have to help.

SKY Schools Curriculum
Making mental health a standard practice in schools is a key step in changing these trends. That’s why Youth Forward MKE has been working with SKY Schools to provide stress reduction tools to students and teachers. This fall, the curriculum was piloted at two local high schools, with plans to expand in the next few years. “This curriculum empowers youth to take wellness and resilience into their own hands,” said Matt Nink of SKY Schools.

MENTOR Youth Summit
The MENTOR Greater Milwaukee Youth Summit aims to create a space where youth feel welcome and included. This, in turn, influences their ability to show up in school and life. This year’s summit in July marked the second such conference. Milwaukee Succeeds/Youth Forward MKE helped sponsor the event, with Youth Forward MKE Ambassadors utilizing the skills they’ve learned to present a session on mental health.

Trauma Response Policy
Mental health and violence are part of a vicious cycle, with each feeding into the other. With violence on the rise – particularly gun violence against those under 30 – it’s no wonder our youth are feeling the effects. Feedback from MPS students, teachers, leaders and central office staff showed the lack of consistent trauma-informed communications following such events.

The Milwaukee Succeeds-led K12 Civic Action Team (CAT) took up the issue this year, ultimately submitting a proposal for the creation of new policies and guidelines. If adopted, these guidelines would help MPS respond to internal and external events with the development of the WI Department of Public Instruction’s Trauma Response Policy, which was adopted as part of a comprehensive approach to preventing and responding to trauma.

Thank you to the dedicated partners who have helped us succeed in 2023!

Thank you to the dedicated partners who have helped us succeed in 2023! Thank you to the 19 organizations that completed the pilot of the Youth Adult Equity Ladder Assessment. A new and improved version is now available! In 2023, Youth Forward MKE presented Capacity Building Grants to five organizations who are leading important youth-centered work: SKY Schools, the MPS Department of Black and Latino Male Achievement, MENTOR Greater Milwaukee, Teach for America and United Way Community Schools. Thank you for all you’re doing for Milwaukee’s youth! And thank you to MPS for their ongoing partnership on the Student Voice Project. Started in 2020, the project aims to magnify student voice, identify opportunities for improvement and build community awareness.
2023 FISCAL IMPACT

$833,055
Local Philanthropy

$461,250
National Philanthropy

$30,000
Other Sources

$171 MILLION
IN NEW PUBLIC FUNDING
to support child care in Wisconsin

$300,000
IN NEW NATIONAL FUNDING
from the Wallace and WK Kellogg Foundations

90%
of outgoing funds directed to Black and Brown-led vendors and nonprofits.

2023 Revenue for Backbone Operations (By Source)

2023 BRIGHT SPOTS

This year, we’ve been busy growing our team of champions, diving into data and raising our voices in support of change. Take a peek at some of our favorite stories:

INCREASING OUR CAPACITY
Creating sustainable change requires a dedicated team of changemakers — and we’ve been working hard to expand ours!

In April, Kelsey Hau joined as the new fund development manager, focused on identifying new funding prospects. In June, Maria Hamidu ended her tenure as a Trinity Fellow and came on board as the high school success project manager, in charge of our youth-centered special projects. And this fall, Anna Smerchek transitioned to the new role of ECE community engagement manager, driving outreach and engagement among ECE Ambassadors, providers and families.

2 NEW SUCCESS STORIES
Our Success Stories were born out of our ongoing commitment to data. In 2023, we added two new stories to the growing list.

The first dives into the Milwaukee Community Schools Quality School Lunch Project, where students set about improving the appeal of everyday lunch offerings. The second digs into the SKY Schools curriculum, which uses breathwork, yoga, conflict resolution and life skills to help students and staff manage their stress and emotions. Both Success Stories feature quotes from participants, survey results, program highlights and opportunities for growth.

WEEK OF THE YOUNG CHILD
In honor of Week of the Young Child in April, educators, families and advocates all raised their voices in support of ECE.

Their inspiring personal stories provided a firsthand look at everything high-quality ECE can do — from setting children up for success in school and later life to boosting the workforce and supporting the economy. Yet their stories also highlighted the ongoing challenges for families, educators and ECE programs. The stories culminated in a call for change, emphasizing the need for a continuous and sustainable investment in early childhood education.
Looking to the Future

As we think about our future, we believe systems can be altered, disrupted and eventually transformed. That’s why the strategic planning process we’re currently undertaking includes the voices of people with lived experiences, as well as other key stakeholders. Those voices speak truth to power. Speaking truth to power takes courage, conviction and action. Within our new strategic plan, we are exhibiting courage by evaluating how ECE and high school education are delivered in Milwaukee and what can be done to improve them. We are also exhibiting courage by using our research capabilities and an equity lens to understand how youth-serving organizations can better serve our young people.

Our conviction happens by way of our data gathering and analytical work, but it also happens because we are engaging the people most affected by the existing systems. By helping them advocate and advance policy initiatives, we are preparing them to be champions for themselves, their families and their entire communities. 

A Collaborative Effort

We recognize the road to change is a long one, but we also know we can’t do it alone. We are engaging partners at every level along the way. We reinforce those efforts indirectly by way of our proximity to the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and other local funders. Our ability to leverage these resources helps our partners make a real difference in the lives of the people they serve.

Our efforts over the next three years will include more intentionality regarding our research and data work; deeper engagement with lived experience partners; and more advocacy and policy activities. At the end of these three years, we hope to see a notable difference in how ECE and high school education are delivered, viewed and supported.
DON’T BE A STRANGER!

Follow us on social media for the latest news and content, and don’t forget to visit our blog for more in-depth articles!