In a June 2014 study, the Indiana Early Learning Advisory Committee recommended improving the accessibility and quality of early childhood programs, while making it more affordable for families challenged to pay the high cost of sending their children to a high-quality program. The solution to affordability has to come from new public investments, in the form of expanded family assistance for low-income and working families. But we can address accessibility and quality now, so lawmakers and taxpayers can be assured their future investments will be well spent. With the generous support of the Lilly Endowment, Early Learning Indiana is launching a five-year initiative—Partnerships for Early Learners—to improve the accessibility and quality of early childhood programming across the state for children ages birth to five. Working closely with new and trusted partners, we will catalyze and build a system that best serves the needs of children, engages families and is worthy and ready to receive new public funding.

THE CHALLENGES FACING FAMILIES OF EARLY LEARNERS

Indiana, like other states, faces some stark realities when it comes to early learning opportunities. First, while the majority of young children—an estimated two-thirds—are in families that need some type of child care, there is not enough capacity in high-quality settings. Second, child care programs and schools are challenged to get better—it is hard for them to maintain safe facilities, hire and keep good teachers and deliver quality programming. Finally, while families want the best for their children, they are not always aware of the value of early education or how to find a high-quality program. Even when families do make that connection, they may not feel welcomed to participate in their child's education or struggle when their child transitions to another setting.

WE WILL BE GUIDED BY THE FOLLOWING CORE PRINCIPLES:

- Build on existing infrastructure that supports early learners and their families, such as existing scholarship programs and tools that rate the quality of early childhood options (such as, the state's Paths to QUALITY rating system and the CLASS assessment of program quality);
- Deepen the work of critical partners that already have relationships with child care providers, school systems, teachers and families, whether local United Way agencies, Indiana’s Association for the Education of Young Children or local child care resource and referral agencies;
- Promote models or strategies that get results and are supported by an evidence-base, so that limited public and private resources are well spent;
- Create partnerships between child cares, K-12 schools and school systems, Head Starts, parent engagement programs, pre- and post-natal providers, hospitals and others; we know that a child's early learning is the responsibility of many people and organizations working together; and
- Measure our progress and hold ourselves accountable for improving the quality of programs available and their accessibility across the state.

OUR GOALS

Over the next five years, combined with the efforts of others, we aspire to reach a place where 75% of Indiana’s children in child care and preschool will be in high-quality programs defined by safe facilities, stimulating and family-friendly learning environments and well-trained and professionally supported teachers. Programs will be well-positioned to continually improve and prepare children for success in school and in life. Reaching this goal will require the development of creative and lasting partnerships and mean new public resources are smartly invested.
Our initiative involves five strategies:

1. **Quality Improvement.** Assist promising early childhood programs in attaining higher levels of quality with facility improvements, curriculum enhancements and professional development for teachers; investments that result in more supportive learning environments and better child outcomes.

2. **Capacity-Building.** Support the expansion and sustainability of high-quality early childhood programs through technical assistance, start-up funds for new classrooms, business practices supports (e.g. accounting and marketing) and by brokering large-scale vendor and partner relationships.

3. **Family Engagement.** Enhance education and referral services for Hoosier families in order to help them make good early childhood decisions, deepen parent engagement and facilitate customized outreach in workplaces and communities.

4. **Workforce Development.** Strengthen the “pipeline” of teachers entering the field of early childhood education through enhanced post-secondary options and opportunities to transition to teaching from other fields; special efforts will be made to focus on helping programs train and retain good teachers.

5. **Innovative Partnerships.** Develop or support model partnership programs that are viable beyond the life of the project; child care providers, schools, universities and family support agencies—among others—will create or grow partnerships to improve early childhood accessibility and quality.

**GET INVOLVED**

**Partnerships are at the core of our movement.** We want partners with passion, commitment, expertise, resources, reach and influence. Just as we will challenge you, we will want you to challenge us to do better, work smarter and achieve greater results. To inquire about partnership opportunities, please contact Kent Mitchell, Vice President of Outreach and Partnerships (kentm@earlylearningindiana.org).

**WE ARE PROUD TO PARTNER WITH THE UNITED WAY OF CENTRAL INDIANA TO EXPAND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY LEARNERS IN INDIANAPOLIS AND SURROUNDING COUNTIES.**

Early Learning Indiana, formerly Day Nursery Association, is the largest and most experienced nonprofit early childhood organization in Central Indiana. Ten high-quality Day Early Learning centers that serve over 800 infants, toddlers and preschoolers are located in the Indianapolis area. Child Care Answers, Indiana’s largest child care resource and referral agency, provides impartial and expert child care referrals for parents, as well as training, coaching and shared services for early childhood professionals and providers in six Indiana counties. Learn more at www.EarlyLearningIN.org.