

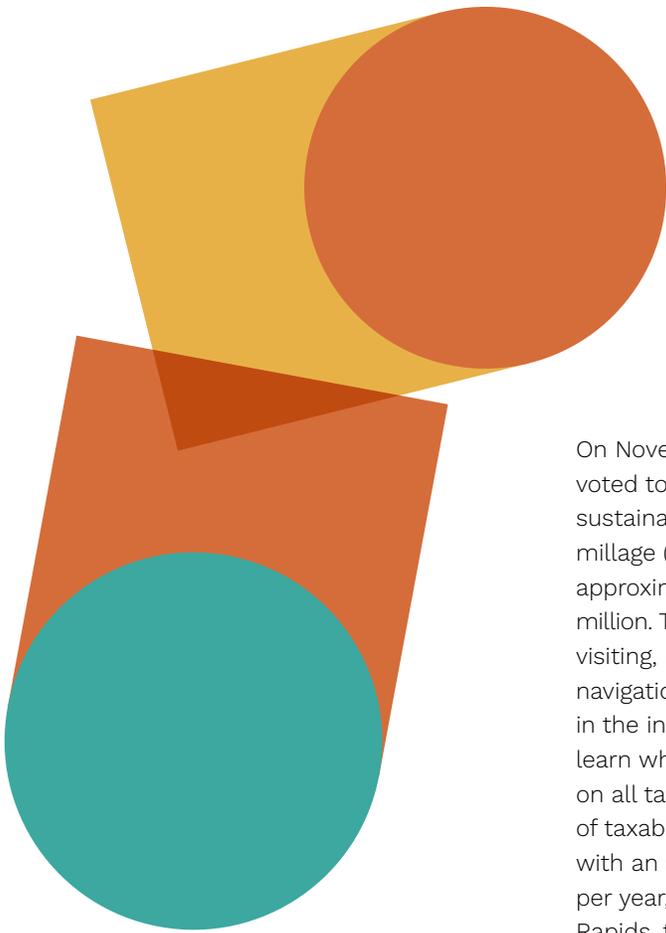


Successful Strategies

How Kent County
Created New Funds
for Early Childhood



Powered by the Pritzker Children's Initiative



On November 6, 2018, the residents of Kent County, Michigan voted to pass a ballot initiative that created new dedicated, sustainable funding for early childhood programs through a millage (property tax). The millage is expected to generate approximately \$5.7 million a year over six years for a total of \$34.2 million. The funds will be used to help pay for services like home visiting, play and learn groups, developmental screenings, and navigation services to help families access these resources, all in the interest of ensuring that children are healthy and ready to learn when they start school. The millage increases taxes levied on all taxable property in Kent County by \$0.25 for every \$1,000 of taxable value from 2019 until 2024. A Kent County homeowner with an average home value of \$150,000 will pay about \$18.75 per year, or \$1.56 per month. Kent County is home to Grand Rapids, the second largest city in the state of Michigan, and one of the fastest growing regions of the United States.

In their quest to implement the ballot initiative, Kent County advocates spoke to leaders in other communities across the country who had experience working on a similar local early childhood ballot proposal—whether it was successful or not. These insights helped Kent County leaders apply lessons learned and navigate their own ballot initiative process. In the same way, Kent County leaders hope to inspire change in other communities by sharing this story with advocates who want to put young children first.



I didn't realize...how big a gap there was for so many students... that so many kids were coming to school and not prepared... they get behind and aren't able to catch up.

Mike Jandernoa, Parent & Grandparent, Founder of Jandernoa Foundation

Background

In the early 1990s, a growing understanding of brain development and the importance of the earliest years of a child's life compelled community leaders to ask, "How are our youngest citizens and their families faring?" They found that some children arrived at kindergarten ready to succeed while others did not. Some with developmental delays or special education needs were not identified before starting school, even though intervention in early childhood has the greatest impact. Too many working families could not afford high-quality child care. Parents who could benefit from family services such as home visiting could not access the supports they needed.



Talent is the driver of economic development... but the talent pipeline starts... when children are small.

Birgit Klohs, CEO and President, The Right Place

Community leaders brought together a powerful cadre of diverse partners to champion the cause with the idea that the community has a meaningful role to play in ensuring that all children reach their full potential in school and life. This group included parents, philanthropists, public sector partners, business leaders, early childhood program professionals, health service providers, county government workers, and personnel from school districts countywide. In addition to the brain research, they were compelled by the economic research that demonstrates a significant return on investment and future cost savings associated with early childhood prevention and intervention. What followed was a process of research, education, and consensus-building. They set out to follow the evidence from research: start prenatally and prioritize the health and educational needs of babies, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Gathering Data and Making the Case

Kent County leaders knew they needed to act but also knew they needed strong data. Much of the information they had about young children was anecdotal or did not provide a comprehensive picture of how all children and families in the community were faring. Leaders knew they needed current information on how many children were ready for school; how many were not; which families needed services and supports; how many families were actually receiving them; the quality of child and family services available to Kent residents; and which services were needed by children and families but were unavailable, inadequate, or inaccessible.

Officially beginning in 2009, First Steps Kent—an independent, neutral entity that leads the county's efforts to strengthen and coordinate early childhood services—became the lead convening organization in the county to coordinate an early childhood system and network. In 2011, First Steps Kent conducted its first gap analysis, or needs assessment, depicting the strengths and gaps of the county's early childhood landscape. The gap analysis was refreshed in 2015 and 2017 to update Kent County on the status of its children and families.

The latest gap analysis showed that of the 44,500 children under age five in the county, 46% were economically disadvantaged. And while most four-year olds in Kent County had access to state-funded, high quality preschool, only 12% (or 3,100) of the economically disadvantaged three-year olds had the opportunity to attend high-quality preschool. Gap analysis data revealed that 9,500 families would most benefit from home-based parenting education, however the county only had the capacity to serve 5,000 families. So 4,500 Kent County families—or 47%—in need of parenting education did not have an opportunity to receive the information and support that would help them nurture their child’s development—a missed opportunity for children.

Following the 2017 gap analysis, parents, practitioners, and policymakers coalesced around Kent County’s Community Plan for Early Childhood, which provided an aspirational overview of the policies, programs, and services that need to be in place for every young child to be healthy and ready to learn. The plan identified the most urgent needs and greatest opportunities to impact children’s health, well-being, and school readiness.

Considering an Early Childhood Millage in Kent County

Pursuing dedicated, sustainable funding through a millage was an idea that had been floating around for more than a decade, but it hadn’t been researched seriously. An early round of polling of Kent County voters in 2015 suggested there was potential for community support, but voters needed to better understand the issue and what they would get in exchange for a local property tax increase.

First Steps Kent hired a local communications firm to implement an aggressive education and public will building campaign. Simultaneously, First Steps Kent leaders explored what it would take to get an early childhood millage passed. They were eager to learn from others as a local early childhood millage had never been approved in Michigan. They spoke to leaders from Palm Beach County, Florida; King County, Washington; and Alameda County, California. These conversations allowed First Steps Kent to understand their peers’ unique pathways for getting their early childhood tax initiatives passed and hear advice on how they handled challenges along the way.²



It’s far less expensive to pour the resources into a young person and help them than it is to deal with the consequences...

Michelle Lajoie-Young,
Kent County Under Sheriff

¹ First Steps Kent defines “economically disadvantaged” as 200% of the federal poverty level.



When you know better, you can do better. We know more now than we did about how the brain works... so now that we have that data... we need to shift our resources towards where we're going to get the best return—and that, is simply starting earlier.

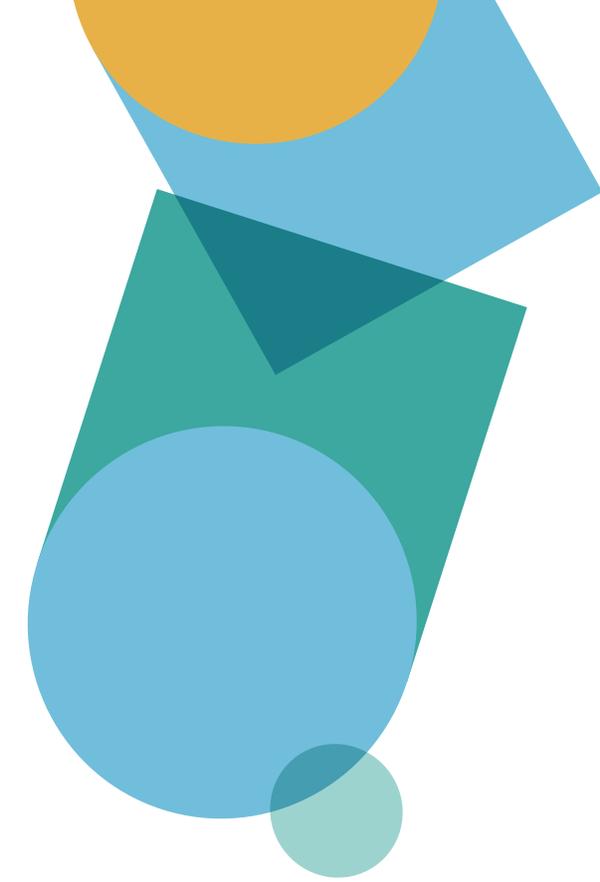
Lynne Ferrell, Parent, Chief
Program Officer, Frey Foundation

Guided by the First Steps Commission (First Steps Kent's board), the organization had a lot to consider regarding whether to move forward with pursuing the millage. As pointed out earlier, there was no precedent of an early childhood millage in the state. They knew the early childhood millage would come at a cost to taxpayers, regardless of how modest the cost might be. If they were going to ask taxpayers to finance this, they needed to justify the cost, convince voters to approve the initiative, and keep them engaged throughout the process.

First Steps Kent leaders also worried about the concept of "millage fatigue." In 1998, the voters of Kent County approved the first senior services millage to help older adults remain in their own homes and communities as they age. In 2006, Kent County residents voted in favor of renewing and increasing the millage for another eight-year term. More recently, in 2016, Kent County voters approved a 10-year property tax increase designed to fund local zoo and museum operations.

After costing out what it would take to fill the current early childhood gaps countywide, estimating the cost of an early childhood millage to Kent County homeowners, considering the advice and lessons learned from their peers in other communities, completing the broad-based education campaign to build public support for early childhood, thinking through whether the initiative could be successful, and exploring return on investment, First Steps Kent officially decided to pursue the early childhood millage. However, significant work remained before the ballot proposal would be announced to the community.

² Both Palm Beach County, Florida and King County, Washington State administer local taxpayer supported early childhood funding. Alameda County's "Measure A" was a ballot initiative which would have increased Alameda County's sales tax by a half cent for the next 30 years. The ballot initiative would have raised \$140 million with an expected impact of more than 21,000 children annually. Measure A needed a two-thirds majority (66.6%) of "yes" votes to go into effect. While the measure did not pass, it came very close, receiving a 66.2% approval and 33.8% rejection.



Community Engagement

Months before announcing the early childhood ballot initiative, First Steps Kent hired a political strategy firm. In fact, it hired the firm that was used to advise other recent countywide ballot initiatives. The firm conducted focus groups in the fall of 2017 and polling in the new year to provide First Steps Kent with a sense of the community's interest in an early childhood millage. The new polling suggested there was enough public support that a millage proposal would have a strong likelihood of success. Both the polling and focus groups provided First Steps Kent with valuable insights about voters' perceptions. It showed a marked increase in public awareness and understanding of the importance of early childhood development and education.

One of the most important takeaways was that language matters. While overall focus group participants were in support of helping children get ready for school, some participants were concerned that early childhood programs would get in the way or seek to take the place of parents caring for their children. This gave First Steps Kent the opportunity to clarify and explain that “programs support parents, not replace them.” This clarification resonated so much that the message was used throughout the campaign.

Around the same time that the focus groups were being held, First Steps Kent hosted a community breakfast with approximately 125 early childhood advocates and community stakeholders. The focus of the breakfast was sharing the compelling findings of the most recent gap analysis. The report, *RE:FOCUS—Analyzing Gaps in Early Childhood Services and Funding in Kent County*, revealed that the spaces available in most early childhood programs can serve only a fraction of Kent County children—in many cases, far fewer than half of subsidy eligible children.³ Several parents shared their experience, describing high-quality early childhood programs that have provided their children with the start they need to be successful in school and beyond.

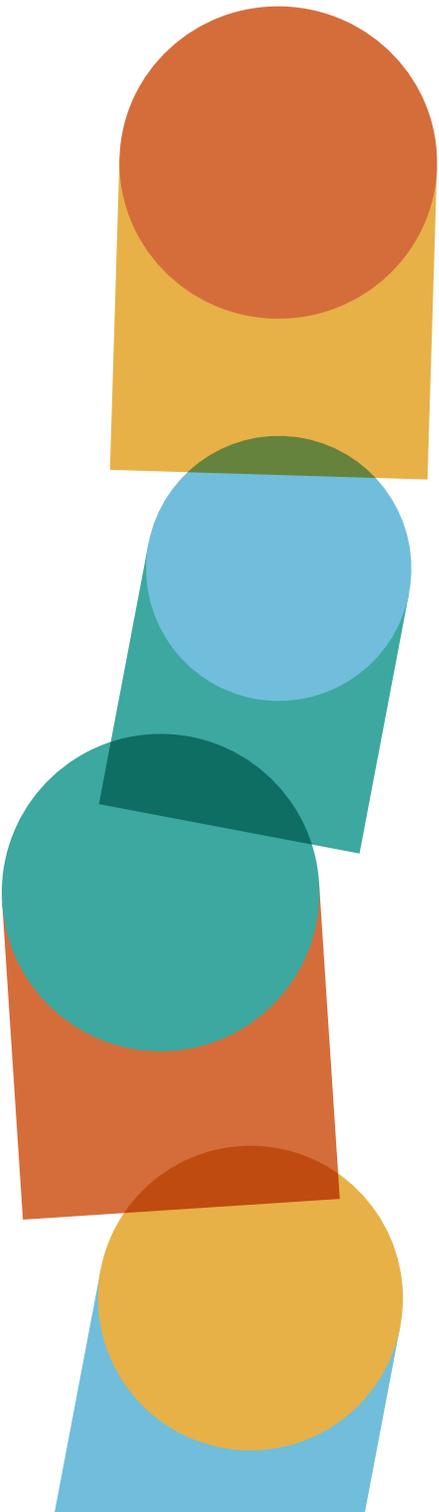
While the ballot initiative wasn't yet being formally announced, the community breakfast meeting kicked off First Steps Kent's efforts to build public will for the early childhood millage. The information shared at the event laid the groundwork for the need to find a local source of dedicated and sustainable funding for early childhood. First Steps Kent intentionally highlighted the voices of parents and business and philanthropic leaders during the breakfast and throughout the campaign.



As a mom I noticed that he was behind. I noticed that his gross-motor wasn't where it [could] be. If we hadn't caught something like that early, maybe other things would have started to get delayed too.

Tobyn, Kent County Parent of Jack, 2 years old, who was helped through developmental screening

³ First Steps Kent (2017). *RE:FOCUS—Analyzing Gaps in Early Childhood Services and Funding in Kent County*. Retrieved from: https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/68151d_a74766bc9ab94213a940ec8c81aa80ec.pdf



In the following spring, First Steps Kent held its first Ready by Five conference. The meeting brought together more than 200 participants who play a role in early childhood development and compelled attendees to be more informed about early childhood issues. Attendees consisted of early care and education professionals, family support providers, health professionals, parents, faith-based providers, school administrators and teachers, business and civic leaders, state agency personnel, and policymakers.

Getting on the Ballot

In Kent County, ballot initiatives must first be approved by the 18-member Kent County Board of Commissioners. First Steps Kent completed and submitted its official application to the Board of Commissioners in February 2018. The proposal clearly stated the purpose of the early childhood millage:

- Support new parents so they can make sure their children are healthy and ready for kindergarten;
- Provide all young children in Kent County with developmental screenings, which are critical for early identification of speech and hearing impairments, autism, and other learning disabilities or delays; and
- Increase access to high-quality early learning experiences that provide a strong, social, emotional, and intellectual foundation for Kent County kids.

The Board of Commissioners reviewed the application and requested several oral presentations throughout the spring. During the presentations, the Board asked for the evidence of the brain development research as well as evidence on First Steps Kent's return on investment claims. Commissioners also wanted evidence that Kent County voters had an appetite for raising taxes to support early childhood programs. First Steps Kent came prepared with all of this information, with actual paper copies of the studies and evidence from the focus groups to demonstrate that voters were in support of this change. First Steps Kent also strategically placed First Steps Kent Commission members and other prominent business leaders in the audience of those presentations to help answer questions and show private sector support of the ballot initiative. On June 28, 2018, the Kent County Board of Commissioners voted 13-5 in favor of putting the millage proposal on the November 2018 ballot.



Early childhood has everything to do with the workforce.

Dr. Juan Olivarez, President Emeritus, Aquinas College

We're On the Ballot! Now What?

The formal announcement of the millage, which became known as the Ready by Five Early Childhood Proposal, came after the County Board's decision to put the issue before voters. While First Steps Kent led the efforts to get the issue on the ballot, the public campaign was handed over to the political strategist firm that First Steps had hired previously to conduct the focus groups. The campaign, *Yes Ready by Five*, went live in September 2018 and ran through Election Day in November. The campaign launched in a public park with First Steps Kent allies surrounded by parents, their young children, local early childhood professionals, and community leaders. *Yes Ready by Five* employed the use of traditional "get out the vote" operations such as presentations to community groups throughout the county, the strategic placements of yard signs, as well as social media strategies such as Facebook ads. The "Start Ahead Stay Ahead" tagline anchored the campaign messaging. First Steps Kent leveraged the working relationship of its business leaders during this time to land a key endorsement from the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce.

With a "yes" vote of 57 percent in November, Kent County became the first county in Michigan with dedicated funding focused solely on early childhood. Stakeholders involved in the process have expressed that the early childhood millage demonstrates the community's commitment to the principle that every child deserves to be healthy and ready to learn, and the understanding that Kent's future prosperity depends on it. Stakeholders are most excited that the new funds will provide sustainable funding for some of the most vital early childhood services. They also recognize that a successful millage will not fill all the existing gaps. They hope to leverage this victory to influence public policy and attract additional private and public funders as they recognize Kent County as a place where their collective investment can make a greater impact.

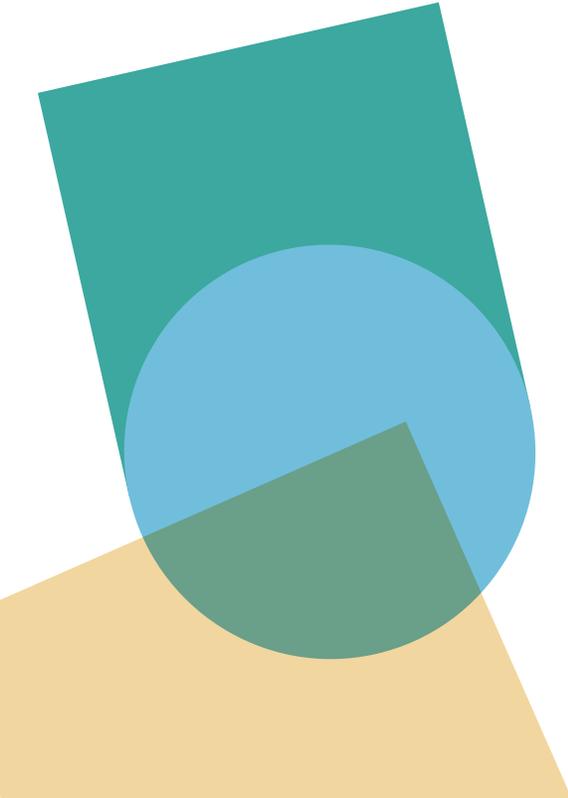
Next Steps: Stewardship of the Millage

Millage funding will be distributed to community-based organizations to increase the number of children and families served by high-quality programming. A portion of the funds will be used to develop a community-wide data system to measure impact. All millage dollars will be publicly reported and go through an independent audit every year to ensure taxpayer funds are spent wisely and transparently.



Lessons to Share with Other Communities:

The process of getting an initiative on the ballot and then working to pass it can be a lengthy and arduous process. Kent County leaders learned some important lessons about what it takes to convince the public to invest collectively in young children and families and how to run a successful ballot initiative.

- **Listen and Learn from Other Communities with Dedicated Funding Experience.** Creating a new funding stream for early childhood can be difficult, but your community is not the first to do so! Do not reinvent the wheel. Take the time to reach out, create connections with, listen to, and learn from other communities that have done this work before.
 - **Trust Your Firm.** If your community has the resources to hire an outside political marketing firm, trust their work. Help them understand your community and your goals, but allow their expertise to help shape your strategies.
 - **Keep It Simple.** Know which specific issues you hope to tackle or which funding stream(s) you hope to access. Don't try to do everything at once!
 - **Create a Recipe for Community Success.** Use your knowledge of your community's unique qualities when crafting your plans. If there are specific political or historical realities, take those into consideration.
 - **Build a Strong Coalition of Funders and Supporters.** Building the infrastructure to support early childhood should unite multiple industries and stakeholders in your community. Think of the ways in which everyone in your community, such as businesses, parents, the public sector, and others are impacted by early childhood issues. Use this information to help build a group of diverse people and organizations to engage in your work.
 - **Build a Realistic Campaign Budget & Stick to It.** Fundraising is often necessary to get an initiative on the ballot and absolutely necessary to get an initiative passed. Campaigns require the investment of committed, enthusiastic stakeholders who are willing to dedicate themselves to spreading the word about the initiative. Campaigns are costly and take time to build momentum. Keep this in mind when you design your campaign budget. Be sure to make room in the budget for advertisements in all the different mediums which are most effective in your community. Once you've created your budget, stick to it.
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- **Keep Your Common Goal in Mind.** When working with a large group of diverse stakeholders, it can sometimes be difficult to remain focused on your goals. Try having a motto for your campaign or guiding principles which serve to remind all participants in your work of their shared purpose.
- **Keep It Non-partisan.** Focus on the selling points of your work which are palatable on both sides of the aisle. Most people agree that children should have a healthy start in life. Start there!
- **Engage Grassroots and Grasstops.** Work with everyone who is sympathetic to your cause. If there are board members, national experts, or top business people who care about what you're doing, get them involved! If there are interested parents, teachers, or others who work at the community level, invite them to be part of the effort as well. Your strategy should span multiple levels of influence.
- **Stay the Course.** When concerns about possible millage fatigue arose, First Steps Kent weighed the pros and cons and ultimately moved forward with the early childhood millage. You won't know whether you'll be successful until you try.
- **Don't Panic.** You are working to create a more supportive early childhood system in your community. Your work matters! It may be challenging at times, but it is important and necessary. When the County Board of Commissioners pressed for additional oral presentations and follow up, First Steps Kent didn't shy away or panic. First Steps Kent followed through and came to each meeting prepared.
- **Do Good Where You Can.** Not all ballot initiatives will pass, but that does not mean the work happens in vain. While you are working on your campaign, help as many people as possible learn about why early childhood matters. Help them understand why better funding to support early childhood in their community is essential. Leave your community more educated about the early childhood period than they were when you started your work. This education lays the groundwork for future efforts, whether your current plan of action is successful or not.

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About First Steps Kent

First Steps Kent is an independent, influential, and neutral entity that leads the community's efforts to strengthen and coordinate early childhood services in Kent County, Michigan. Learn more about their work at www.FirstStepsKent.org.

About CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. We do this by advocating with and for children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices. Learn more about our work at www.CSSP.org.

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