

Creating a New Dedicated Source of Early Childhood Funding: *Onondaga County, NY*

Community Solutions to Supporting the Well-Being of Expectant Parent, Babies, and Toddlers

March 2020 | PN-3 Community Innovations





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I believe we as a community need to ask ourselves a simple question, do we invest in our children while they are young to prepare them for future success, or do we wait until they make a poor decision and spend significantly more trying to help them become productive members of our community again? For me, the answer is easy. Having children kindergarten-ready will result in fewer dropouts, higher graduation rates and a decrease in poverty.”

County Executive, Ryan McMahon,
Onondaga County, New York, October 18,
2019

In Onondaga County, New York, third grade reading scores for all children are well below the state average. Large gaps exist by income, race, and ethnicity, and these disparities are even greater in the city of Syracuse.¹ Less than one-third of eligible children under the age of five have access to child care subsidies and the cost of child care, particularly infant and toddler care, is unaffordable for many families.² To promote a community “where all children are healthy, thriving and ready to succeed in school,” the community galvanized around a multi-pronged approach to support healthy child development—particularly among infants and toddlers.

In October 2019, the Onondaga County Legislature approved the 2020 county budget proposed by County Executive Ryan McMahon.³ The budget included an increase of \$1.5 million to fund Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing to increase parents’ and caregivers’ daily reading with young children; Help Me Grow Onondaga to increase developmental screenings, referrals and follow-up to community-based services where warranted; a parent leadership initiative; and three child care quality improvement pilots to strengthen the quality of child care for infants and toddlers.

The county budget together with private and philanthropic support will increase funding for early childhood services by more than \$2.3 million.



Background

For years, Onondaga County, particularly the city of Syracuse, struggled with high poverty, including intergenerational poverty, low elementary school reading and math test scores, and affordability challenges regarding families attempting to access high-quality child care.

The Early Childhood Alliance (ECA) Onondaga was formed in 2015 following the release of the Onondaga Citizens League report, “*Early Childhood and School Readiness: Creating a Community Where All Children Thrive by Five*,” which described in detail Onondaga County’s fragmented array of early childhood programs and funding streams.⁴ The report called for a common vision and goals guided by a strategic plan informed by data driven strategies to ensure that all children throughout the county enter kindergarten ready to succeed. ECA was charged with developing a collaborative community vision and specific strategies aligned with that vision.

Building a Cross-Sector Coalition

The charge meant building a cross-sector coalition to support healthy children, strong families, and access to high-quality child care and early learning. Onondaga County approached the task by including county and municipal leaders, business leaders, academic and nonprofit leaders, members of the philanthropic community, and other key stakeholders to develop an early childhood action plan for 2016-2020.⁵ They formed committees to address child care, developmental screenings, home visiting and parenting supports, and the reduction of unintended pregnancies.

In May 2017, the ECA launched Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing, a national public awareness campaign developed by Too Small To Fail to support parents in promoting early brain and language development with their children.⁶ In 2018, the ECA partnered to bring the Parent-Child Plus evidence-based home visiting program to the community and a new initiative called Layla’s Got You was launched by the Allyn Family Foundation to address high unintended pregnancy rates in the county. In January 2019, the ECA launched Help Me Grow Onondaga to strengthen the ways families navigate and access community services, including developmental screenings, referrals, and follow up services for children.⁷

A key part of ECA’s work was developing strategies to strengthen high-quality child care. This included strategies to improve the quality of legally exempt care, a category of child care authorized by New York State for children whose care is paid for through child care subsidies in an unlicensed setting. Addressing the quality of legally exempt care was of particular importance because nearly one-third of children under five years of age whose care is subsidized are in legally exempt care.⁸

The ECA partnered with Child Care Solutions, a non-profit childcare resource and referral agency to spearheaded a landscape review of early learning settings and to develop recommendations to strengthen child care in the county.⁹

In the fall of 2018, Child Care Solutions and the ECA held a series of stakeholder meetings with child care center directors, registered and licensed family child care home providers, community college faculty, the ECA business council, the Child Care and Early Learning Committee and ECA partners to identify barriers and opportunities to strengthen

the quality of child care.¹⁰ Throughout the 2018-2019 period, the Onondaga County Department of Social Services—Economic Security department (agency that administers child care subsidies) shared data, insights, and experiences regarding serving families with low incomes.¹¹

In February of 2019, Child Care Solutions and the ECA surveyed parents, child care center directors, center-based child care staff, and family child care providers to seek their input on child care related challenges. Community mapping was developed to reveal family access (or lack of access) to child care. The mapping showed the locations of various early learning settings and included map shading based on poverty levels, family employment status, and concentrated areas where legally-exempt care was operating. Ultimately, a report was released in June of 2019, *Transforming the Early Childhood Landscape in Onondaga County to Promote School Readiness*, which included 10 recommendations to support healthy child development across child care settings.¹²

Preparation Meets Opportunity

The ECA and advocacy partners used the recommendations from the school readiness report in discussions with County Executive Ryan McMahon as he sought to develop the 2020 county budget. Because the County Executive had identified a PIE initiative (addressing poverty, modernizing infrastructure, and creating new economic development opportunities) as his primary goals in developing the budget, advocates were able to connect child care strategies with the goals of reducing poverty and promoting economic development.¹³ It was helpful that the 39-year-old County Executive had young children, including a child under the age of three, and fully understood that access to quality child care helps support school readiness and school success.

In September of 2019, County Executive McMahon's proposed 2020 budget reduced the county property tax rate from \$5.04 to \$5.00 per \$1,000, a historic low. However, because property assessments increased 4.2 percent, additional funding was made possible for new initiatives.¹⁴ Included in the County Executive's budget was \$1.5 million for Talking is Teaching, Help Me Grow Onondaga, three child care quality pilots (a center-based initiative, a family child care home-based initiative, and a legally exempt care initiative) and an Early Childhood Parent Leadership initiative to engage parents in co-developing community level early childhood strategies. An additional \$855,000 from private and philanthropic contributions adds up to a little over \$2.3 million in new funds to strengthen early childhood services throughout the county. The 2020 county budget was approved by the County Legislature on October 9 and went into effect on January 1, 2020.¹⁵

How Does It Work?

Onondaga County's Early Childhood Initiative will invest in young children and their families when it matters most. The 2020 budget will support new parents so their children are healthy and ready for kindergarten; provide health and developmental screenings along with referrals and follow-up services; strengthen the quality of child care through three pilots; and provide support for a better coordinated and effective early childhood system.

- **Talking is Teaching.** A targeted strategy will work with 1,000 families through home visitors and 3,000 parents through pediatric practices. The goal is to increase the amount of reading on a daily basis with young children.

- **Help Me Grow Onondaga.** Help Me Grow will increase the amount of developmental screenings and and effective referrals to community-based services. The goal is to increase the number of screenings and referrals (where warranted) to services for children who have or who may be at-risk for developmental delays.
- **Child Care—Center Based Pilot.** A center-based infant and toddler child care pilot will target 3-5 centers with high levels of children receiving subsidies to receive

“We want to step on the gas.”

comprehensive support to strengthen the quality of child care (e.g., curriculum support and training,

support to engage in ongoing child assessments and strong teacher-child interactions, and business technical assistance to strengthen program economic viability). Directors and teachers will receive compensation increases to ensure that programs can hire and retain high-quality staff with the goal of improving school readiness and child outcomes.

- **Child Care—Family Child Care Pilot.** At least 10 home-based family child care providers serving infants and toddlers will participate in a similar pilot to strengthen the quality of home-based programs and improve child outcomes.
- **Child Care—Legally Exempt Providers.** A pilot targeted at improving the quality of care among legally exempt child care providers serving infants and toddlers. The pilot will use the Talking is Teaching program and will include the distribution of tote bags of developmentally appropriate games and books.
- **Early Childhood Parent Leadership Strategy.** THRIVE, a new initiative will engage parents in identifying barriers to services and support access. The goal is that parents have a voice in policy and system design to ensure that community early childhood services best meet family needs.

Lessons Learned

- **Use an Equity Frame.** How well is your early childhood system meeting the needs of the entire population of young children and their families? Are there gaps? Where is the system contributing to or perpetuating inequities? Are certain racial and ethnic groups impacted disproportionately? The ECA has begun to incorporate parent and community voice into system building with the THRIVE initiative. The goal of THRIVE is to partner with parents to build a more responsive and equitable early childhood system that is responsive to all families.
- **Collect and Use Data.** Use data to inform policy. The local child care resource and referral agency and other community partners had been leading the way in gathering and sharing data on the quality of local child care settings for several years. That data collection effort led to the development of the landscape review and recommendations document. Advocates used these recommendations to advise the County Executive who in turn integrated them into his 2020 budget proposal.
- **Pick up the Phone.** Identify other communities that have been successful with the policy you’re pursuing. Listen to and learn from other communities within your state and beyond. Gather the lessons learned to inform your local strategies!¹⁶
- **Align Your Issues.** Onondaga’s County Executive signaled early on that early childhood was a priority. He remarked, “We want to step on the gas” in response to his 2020

budget which unveiled several early childhood initiatives. Prior to this, he had identified poverty reduction and economic development as his primary goals in developing the budget.¹⁷ Advocates wisely linked their child care strategies to these stated priorities.

Key Action Resources

- [Early Childhood and School Readiness: Creating a Community Where All Children Thrive by Five](#), Onondaga Citizens League, 2013.
 - [Early Childhood Action Plan 2016-2020](#).
 - [Transforming the Early Childhood Landscape in Onondaga County to Promote School Readiness](#), Child Care Solutions and Early Childhood Alliance, June 2019.
 - Transforming the Early Childhood Landscape, [Executive Summary](#), June 2019.
 - Transforming the Early Childhood Landscape, [Infographic](#), June 2019.
 - County Executive Ryan McMahon's [2020 County Budget](#), October 2019.
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Endnotes

¹ NYState.Data.Gov, Onondaga County <https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?county=42>.

² Early Childhood Alliance Onondaga and Child Care Solutions, Transforming the Early Childhood Landscape in Onondaga County to Promote School Readiness, 2019. <https://childcaresolutionscny.org/sites/default/files/Transforming%20the%20Early%20Childhood%20Landscape%20In%20Onon.%20Cty.pdf>.

³ 2020 Executive Budget, approved October 9, 2019. <http://www.ongov.net/finance/documents/2020ExecutiveBudget-Book.pdf>.

⁴ Onondaga Citizens League, “Early Childhood and School Readiness: Creating a Community Where All Children Thrive by Five,” (2013). <http://onondagacitizensleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/OCL-2013-final-copy-for-web.pdf>.

⁵ <https://ecaonondaga.org/about-us>

⁶ Early Childhood Alliance, Talking is Teaching Launch, May 2017. <http://toosmall.org/news/press-releases/eca-ononda-ga-launches-talking-is-teaching-talk-read-sing-campaign-to-help-children-succeed-in-school-and-life>.

⁷ Early Childhood Alliance, Help Me Grow Onondaga, January 2019. <https://ecaonondaga.org/4450>.

⁸ Early Childhood Alliance Onondaga and Child Care Solutions, Transforming the Early Childhood Landscape in Onondaga County to Promote School Readiness, 2019. <https://childcaresolutionscny.org/sites/default/files/Transforming%20the%20Early%20Childhood%20Landscape%20In%20Onon.%20Cty.pdf>.

⁹ Child Care Solutions, Syracuse. <https://childcaresolutionscny.org/>.

¹⁰ Early Childhood Alliance Onondaga and Child Care Solutions, Transforming the Early Childhood Landscape in Onondaga County to Promote School Readiness, 2019. <https://childcaresolutionscny.org/sites/default/files/Transforming%20the%20Early%20Childhood%20Landscape%20In%20Onon.%20Cty.pdf>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ <https://mcmahonforonondagacounty.com/>

¹⁴ Syracuse.com, McMahon’s county budget: Flat taxes, more diversity, sewer consolidation, September 13, 2019. <https://www.syracuse.com/news/2019/09/mcmahons-county-budget-flat-taxes-more-diversity-sewer-consolidation.html>.

¹⁵ Onondaga County Legislature approves 2020 budget, October 9, 2019. <https://www.localsyr.com/news/local-news/onondaga-county-legislature-approves-2020-budget/>.

¹⁶ Early Learning Nation, Early Childhood Alliance Onondaga: A Master Class in Cross-Sector Coalition Building, November 5, 2019. <http://earlylearningnation.com/2019/11/early-childhood-alliance-onondaga-a-master-class-in-cross-sector-coalition-building/>.

¹⁷ <https://mcmahonforonondagacounty.com/>

