Early Childhood Initiative

“"We want to give our children the best possible start toward a healthy life of learning, achieving and succeeding.”

Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative mission

The six Minnesota Initiative Foundations—including West Central Initiative—formed the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) based on ground-breaking studies that show how strengthening early care and education for young children and their families is the most important investment communities can make for the future.

Think about it: Our young children are our future employers, workers, government officials, medical staff, engineers, parents, taxpayers, homeowners ... the list goes on. If we start now to make sure they grow into strong, healthy, community-minded adults, we build the foundation for a strong, healthy society and workforce.

Through the research, the ECI identified and planned strategies around five key components to raising healthy, thriving children:

- Strong families
- Engaged community members
- Effective and coordinated early care and education
- Early learning opportunities
- Ready schools

Building nurturing communities of thriving children

The ECI works by bringing people and organizations together to form communities that support the well-being of our youngest children. There are nearly 90 communities throughout Minnesota. West Central Initiative supports coalition building in 10 community sites throughout west central Minnesota. These ECI communities seek the involvement of parents, senior citizens, educators, business and community leaders, the faith community, policy makers and all citizens interested in making their community a nurturing environment for young children and their families. The ECI is not about specific programs or grant awards, it’s about joining together in a long-term effort to make young children a real priority. The ECI is about working with others to assess current early childhood efforts, figuring out what more your community can do and then doing it.

Each ECI team is lead by a coordinator who facilitates the process of identifying, planning and implementing strategies specific to helping their communities become more nurturing places for young children and their families.

10 ECI communities:
- Becker County ECI
- Clay County ECI
- Douglas County ECI
- Grant County ECI
- Otter Tail County ECI
- Pope County ECI
- Stevens County ECI
- Traverse County ECI
- White Earth ECI
- Wilkin County ECI

Funds leveraged for west central Minnesota since 2001:
More than $7 million

Regional projects:
- Early Childhood Dental Network
- School Readiness
- Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative
- Family Economic Success
- Child Care Workgroup
- Home visiting

West Central Initiative is an equal opportunity provider, lender and employer.
Recent ECI Community Projects

The Becker County ECI partners with several agencies and groups to promote literacy activities, including Reach Out and Read, Imagination Library and the Kiwanis’ Today’s Readers-Tomorrow’s Leaders project. The ECI partnered with the local movie theatre to host a viewing of “Raising of America”, followed by discussion. A subsequent session was held to develop goals.

In partnership with the Mardag Foundation, Minnesota Children’s Finance and community partners, the Clay County ECI continues to address child care shortages through community taskforce, a dedicated Parent Aware coach and training. This year’s Kidfest provided games, resource booths and a free book to over 700 children who attended.

Douglas County Building Connections ECI has partnered with United Way to equip their own Traveling Tree House, providing early education in local parks and smaller communities where opportunities are limited. The Tree House staff presents the AMAZE curriculum, an anti-bias, literacy based curriculum that teaches children to understand differences while learning to read.

The Grant County ECI and partners provide a continuum of resources, services and support for families of young children, such as: implementing quarterly “Look What I Can Do!” early developmental screenings; compiling and distributing a County Resource Guide; holding family events; and providing support for child care providers and family, friend and neighbor caregivers.”

Children learn through play. The Otter Tail County ECI takes this to heart by providing fun, interactive areas for children to play and learn, like the Mud Pie Park. This natural play park and outdoor classroom allows children to experience the wonder of nature. The new addition of the Born Learning Trail guides parents and their children through the park with fun activities that connect nature with literacy and math skills.

All roads lead to education as the Pope County EC/THRIVE Initiative travels throughout the county on the Traveling Tree House Mobile Learning Center. The Traveling Tree House spotlights the importance of caring for our youngest citizens. Children are invited to hop on board, and early childhood teachers share creative and engaging learning experiences at child care homes/centers and Wonderful Wednesdays in the summer.

Southern Valley ECI (Wilkin County in MN and Richland County in ND) is a dual-county, across-the-state-border coalition that works hard at understanding and overcoming the barriers that families encounter. Much effort is put into home visiting, access to preschool, local training for caregivers, and support for all professionals.

The Stevens County ECI worked with school administration, kindergarten and preschool teachers to develop a kindergarten readiness assessment tool. The kindergarten teachers worked with local childcare providers to show what type of readiness skills they are looking for upon school entrance and provided ideas for how to teach these skills during the regular child care schedule. This is a part of the ongoing Prek-3 Alignment efforts.

Traverse Early Childhood Coalition and community partners support families with young children through: no or lo-cost family events, location-based programming, parent education opportunities and Look What I Can Do! Early Childhood screening. The coalition works with early educators, providers and the family, friend, neighbor care network to improve the lives of the children they work with through child care home visiting, regional low-cost training day and access to evidence-based curriculum.

The Community of White Earth ECI supports families with young children by helping to provide opportunities and resources such as; free lending libraries, Smart Play Spot-an interactive early literacy environment, Look What I Can Do! Early developmental screenings, autism focus groups, community events, updated resource guides as well as a network of programs/people who are able to help support children and their families.