



Early Childhood Issue Brief

In 2019 the Community Foundation of Elkhart County named early childhood development and education as a priority for investment of resources. This Issue Brief serves as a guiding document and resource for CFEC's involvement in this community-wide effort.

Children are born learning, and their experiences in the first years of life form the building blocks for their future success in the classroom, in the workplace, and in the community.

According to Harvard University's [Center on the Developing Child](#), "Healthy development in the early years (particularly birth to three) provides the building blocks for educational achievement, economic productivity, responsible citizenship, lifelong health, strong communities, and successful parenting of the next generation." The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) promotes the significance of the [First Thousand Days](#), referring to the period from pregnancy through a child's second birthday, as a critical time for brain development, healthy growth, and setting the foundation for lifelong health. The Community Foundation of Elkhart County is especially interested in supporting the prevention of negative outcomes and ensuring safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children, beginning in their homes from the very beginning.

Early Childhood

The Community Foundation of Elkhart County defines Early Childhood development and education as spanning a wide range of ages, issues, and settings. We include the prenatal months through 8 years of age/3rd grade. Topics include social, emotional, & academic learning and factors that ensure that children and their primary caregivers are well-nourished, supported and free from trauma and toxic stress. Finally, early learning settings include formal & informal environments, and caregivers include families, teachers, friends, health care providers, home visitors, relatives and neighbors, and many others who care for our community's children.

Addressing Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Disparities in Early Childhood

We know that people of color face more obstacles to achieving developmental and educational milestones. They face historical inequities, unfair policies & practices, higher levels of stress, and more. Yet, we aspire to do more than close gaps. We truly desire for all children to flourish. We will use disaggregated data to identify systemic barriers to success.

Desired Result: Our Children are Prepared for Success

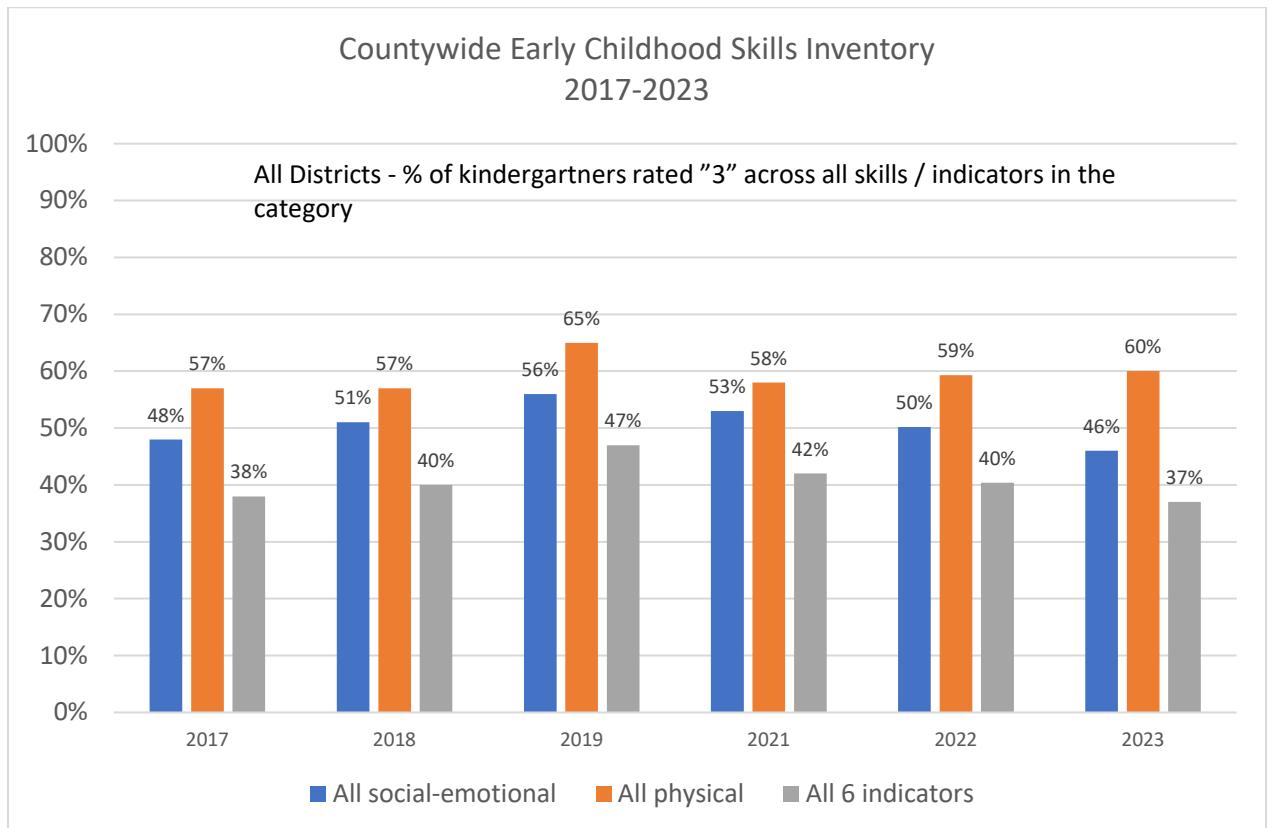
Our vision is that all Elkhart County children are prepared for success as they begin school and thrive in the early grades.

Foundational Framework: In 2021 CFEC led community stakeholders to develop an approach to improve early childhood outcomes, using the Results Based Accountability (RBA) Framework. RBA is a disciplined way of thinking and taking action collectively. It begins with the end result in mind and works backward, step by step, to the strategies.

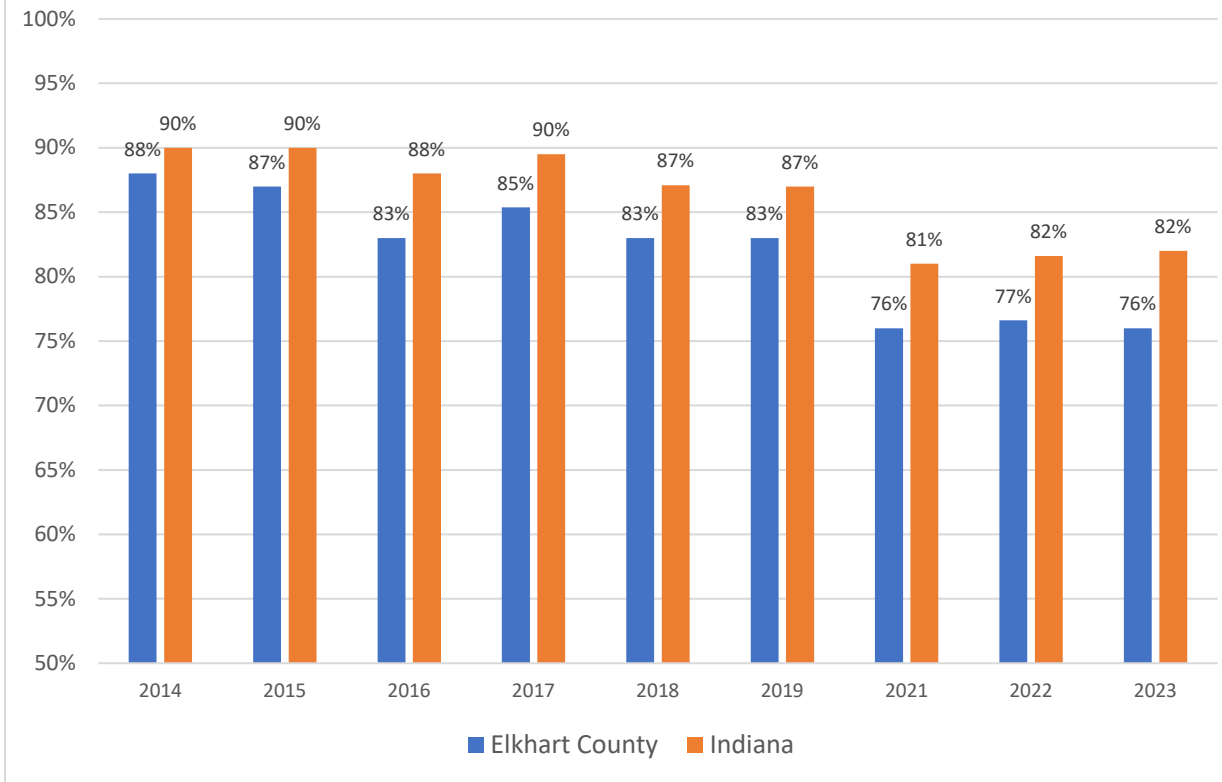
RBA makes an important distinction between population and performance accountability. In population accountability, the entire community, including the public and private sectors, shares responsibility for achieving the desired community conditions. Performance accountability, by comparison, is held at a program, agency, or service level and determines whether the clients or customers of the program or service are better off. This distinction ensures that appropriate responsibility is attached to programs and services and avoids the expectation that one single program can produce significant population-level results.

Early Childhood Population-level Measures:

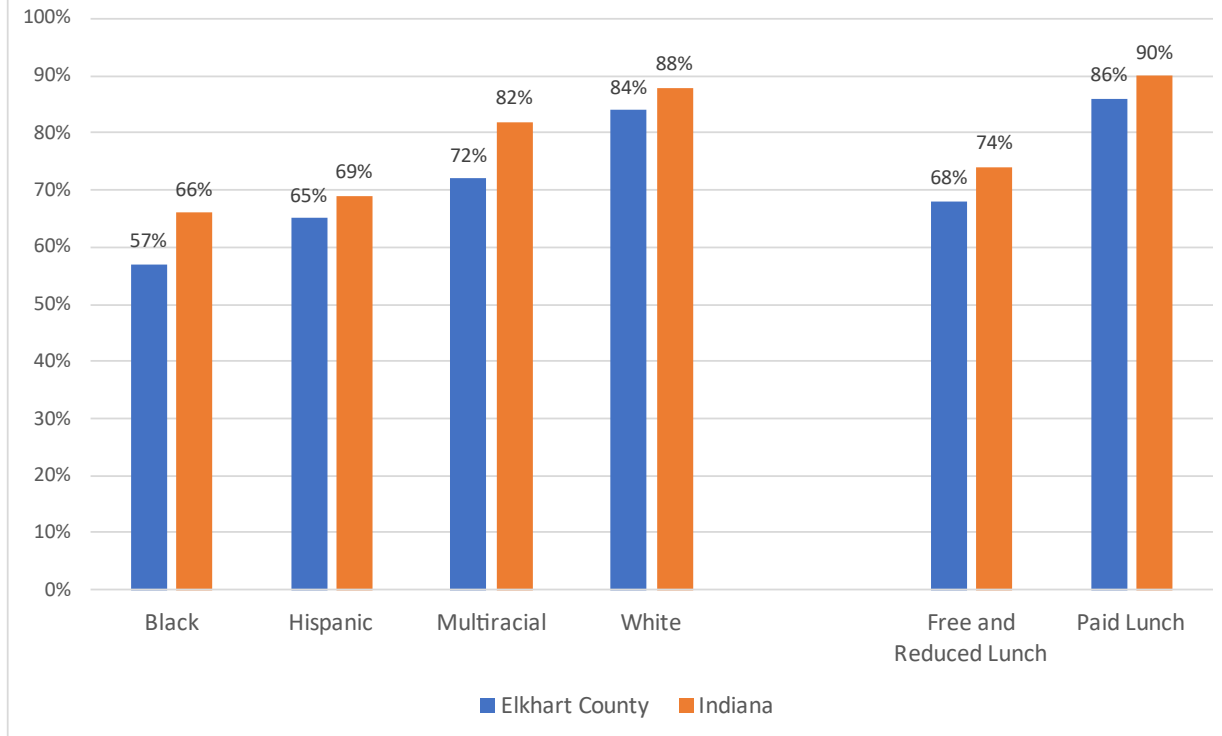
- **Kindergarten readiness** – the Elkhart County Early Skills Inventory, measuring readiness across six developmental domains, was developed by Elkhart County Kindergarten teachers and researchers.
- **Third-grade reading scores** – measured through the state IREAD-3 assessment.



Elkhart County I-READ Passing Rate 2014-2023



I-READ Passing Rate 2023- Disaggregated



Priorities

While the best available population-level indicators are measured when children enter school, research shows that the most significant returns are realized from investments made at the very beginning of the child's learning – with their family in their home. The Community Foundation will demonstrate the importance of this issue by prioritizing programs and projects that impact perinatal and the very early years of childhood.

Many factors influence the early development of children. These factors include healthy & well-timed births, healthy & safe environments, supported & supportive families, and high-quality childcare options. No single program alone can drive significant change in either of the population-level measures. A collection of targeted interventions, however, CAN lead to meaningful change in a community.

Disaggregated data

The purpose of disaggregated data is to understand gaps in opportunities, experiences, and outcomes within communities to identify systemic issues. Disaggregated data is a tool for communities to understand how the system is currently working and build on community strengths and assets to close gaps. There can be many causes for equity gaps in data, including bias within research tools and data collection methods. Disaggregated data should only be used as a starting point to explore disparities from a systemic and assets-based perspective to avoid perpetuating false stereotypes or narratives about individuals and communities.

Systems-level approach: Building Strong Brains

In 2022 leaders from organizations focused on early childhood success agreed to take a decade-long, systems-level approach to improve outcomes in Elkhart County. Tamarack Institute was engaged for consultation and support, and a director was hired in June 2023. Named *Building Strong Brains*, the coalition quickly developed structure around the pillars of Maternal and Child Health, Community Supports for Children and Families, and Quality Child Care and Early Learning Environments. CFEC provides backbone support, coordinating activities across the collaborative.

Resources

- Harvard University, Center for the Developing Child [Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families](#)
 - [Support responsive relationships for children and adults.](#)
 - [Strengthen core life skills.](#)
 - [Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families.](#)
- Success Indicators in Early Learning and Education: <https://www.fsg.org/publications/markers-matter>
- Indiana's Management Performance Hub. <https://www.in.gov/mph/>

- CDC's Essentials for Childhood: Creating Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments
 - https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/EfC_onepager-a.pdf
- Adverse Childhood Experiences.
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>
- Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences.
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingACES.pdf>
- Tufts University: HOPE-Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences program
<https://positiveexperience.org/>

Graphs provided by Horizon Educational Alliance.