

HAPPY, HEALTHY AND THRIVING CHILDREN:

Supporting a unified early childhood ecosystem
in Cuyahoga County

Invest in Children's 2024-2027 Strategic Plan

Invest in Children



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A Letter from the Director

Dear Friends of Invest in Children:

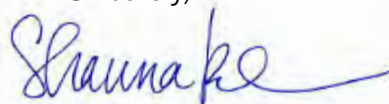
It is with great excitement, and a recommitted sense of purpose, that during our 25th Anniversary year we share with you Invest in Children's new three-year strategic plan.

In 1999, leaders from across our community came together to create Invest in Children with a goal of strengthening and enhancing the network of supports for young children and families in Cuyahoga County. We have proudly carried that torch over the past 25 years, working with you to build and champion a strong system of programs and resources from prenatal services to kindergarten readiness. In that work, we have seen the needs of families with young children in Cuyahoga County, and the professionals who serve them, continue to evolve. That is why we initiated the development of this plan, to ensure that the work and capacity of Invest in Children thoughtfully evolves to meet those needs. To do that with integrity and transparency, we intentionally engaged the broader early childhood community and those we serve. We knew that the voices of our stakeholders would give us the most useful direction.

The central and defining characteristic of our strategic planning process was stakeholder input. We wanted and needed to hear from families and caregivers, providers, advocates, civic leaders and private philanthropic organizations. To capture those voices objectively, we enlisted the support of The Osgood Group, LLC and tasked them to conduct more than 75 personal interviews to determine what is most needed for young children and their families, and, with that as our context, what Invest in Children can do to better meet those needs. The responses were compelling. We were humbled by both the accolades and the constructive comments received. But our most emotional moments were those that reminded us of the magnitude of the need that remains, and the moral imperative of equity that continues to drive our work.

We hope you take a moment to review this plan. While the planning process is done, the listening will never stop. We hope you share with us your thoughts and feelings, too. Continued stakeholder input is the fuel that powers Invest in Children, and it will always be warmly embraced.

Sincerely,



Shawna Rohrman
Director, Invest in Children
Cuyahoga County
Office of Early Childhood

HISTORY AND STORY

The first five years of a child's life are a time of tremendous growth. No single agency can provide parents with all supports needed for the ambitious task of preparing young children for success in school and life. In an effort to bolster the chances for children and their families to thrive, Cuyahoga County's community leaders came together in 1999 to create the public/private partnership known as Invest in Children.

Over the last 25 years, Invest in Children and its innovative public/private partnership model has been recognized as a leader in early childhood ecosystem-building within the state and nation. We are pleased to share a few high-level findings identified during our planning process that demonstrate Invest in Children's impact, and, just as important, a belief in our ability to advance equity and deliver even greater impact for our most vulnerable children and families county-wide:

- **Outcomes:** Invest in Children focuses on high quality programs and services that demonstrate positive outcomes for young children and families and provide a significant return on investment.
- **County Support:** County leadership expresses unwavering commitment to addressing the needs of our most vulnerable children and families, and a continuing commitment to the public private/partnership model upon which we were founded.
- **Partner and Funder Support:** Invest in Children is nothing without the incredible thought leadership, talent, programs and resources of our agency partners and funders, who express belief in our ability to do more to coordinate the work of our sector on behalf of young children and their families.
- **Trust:** Our agency partners, funders, County leadership and the families we serve view us as 'good actors' and 'trusted partners.' This gives us the confidence to be better stewards and to drive innovative, system-wide solutions to the most intractable problems facing young children in our community.

At the same time, we are keenly aware of the tremendous challenges young children and families face. The pandemic's impact on the sector has been substantial, wide-ranging and stubbornly persistent. Childhood behavioral challenges have become more prevalent and more acute. Early childhood mental health issues have become more significant. And workforce shortages impact new and emerging areas of need as well as all of our historically high-impact focus areas such as home visiting (helping new parents adjust to the joys and challenges of raising a new child) and access to affordable and high quality childcare and early learning (connecting children and their families to high-quality early childhood education focused on kindergarten readiness). In sum, providers and parents are struggling to keep their heads above water.

With the community's continued support and belief in our ability, and with our deep commitment to changing outcomes for young children and families, we share with you our strategic plan. But first, we'd like to give you a view into the work that's been done to ground this plan. Over 75 stakeholders in the early childhood ecosystem provided input. We are incredibly grateful to those who gave time through thoughtful participation in this process.



County-Wide Agency Partner Retreat and Additional Convenings

Agency partners and funders discussed how to better coordinate existing work and planned for delivering additional, improved services for children and families in Cuyahoga County. This provided critical input for Invest in Children's strategic plan and has a direct translation into our strategic plan goals.

"The Bruening Foundation saw it as imperative to invest in a retreat that pulled agency partners and funders together to have critical conversations around the current needs of the early childhood ecosystem and to establish key actions. We hope this kind of convening will continue to occur as it helps to unify and align the sector moving forward."

- Jeanine Gergel
Bruening Foundation

A New Strategic Plan

Following the county's leadership transition and the valuable input we received at the Agency Partner Retreat, we felt ready for a strategic planning process that would dig deep into the community for a 360-degree view on early childhood needs, how those needs are being met across service providers, the best possible role Invest in Children could play given its strengths, weaknesses and needs of the community and, in that context, Invest in Children's capacity.

"It was important for us to build a new strategic plan – one that helped us hear directly from our agency partners, funders and parents of young children. Given our 25-year body of work, and the opportunities ahead, we have recognized this as the most ideal time to set a future path for Invest in Children."

- Shawna Rohrman
Director, Invest in Children
Cuyahoga County
Office of Early Childhood





STRATEGIC PLANNING

The early childhood ecosystem is evolving. Invest in Children reevaluated how it is addressing this need in alignment with new county leadership, funding shifts, growth and evolution of agency partner work and the real-time needs of young children and parents.

As such, we launched a planning process, beginning with development of a Request For Proposal for a new strategic plan. Over the next three years, this plan will allow Invest in Children to focus on the work that would deliver the highest impact for our County. After a thorough evaluation process, we chose The Osgood Group, LLC because of their experience, fact-based analytical planning approach and their post-plan support which will power the transition from inspiration and aspiration into action and successful execution.

The research and input to our plan has been intentionally robust. We started by reflecting on years of research and impact of Invest in Children's work within the County. We also looked at best practices and models outside the County. Most importantly, we engaged those we serve and our partners: parents of young children, agency leadership, funders, public officials from Cuyahoga County and the City of Cleveland and Invest in Children staff.

Specifically, the work completed by The Osgood Group included:

- Interviews with funders and agency partners, to better understand community need and assess the effectiveness of Invest in Children in supporting agencies and the community in meeting those needs.
- Agency benchmarking, through interviews and online research, to better understand service offerings throughout the County.
- Interviews with parents receiving services, to better understand service quality, service needs and barriers to accessing needed services.
- Interviews with County leadership, to assess the effectiveness of Invest in Children and its fit within stated County priorities.
- Interviews with staff, to assess the infrastructure and capacity to meet the needs of agency partners and young children.
- Program engagement analysis, to understand program reach and impact.
- Budget and funding analysis, to understand the consistency of the budget and how it is allocated to Invest in Children and partners.



THE ASPIRATION

With a deeper understanding of our environment, and the expressed hopes and dreams our stakeholders, we established our new vision and mission, along with the values and beliefs that ground our work.

Our Vision: Aspiration for the Young Children in Cuyahoga County
Young children in Cuyahoga County are happy, healthy and thriving.

Our Mission: How Invest in Children Serves the Vision
Invest in Children leverages the public and private sectors to connect, coordinate, support and prioritize a strong network of programs and services to benefit young children, families and caregivers across the County.

Values and Beliefs: The Foundation for Everything We Do

Our public/private partnership model is rooted in the overarching belief that we are strongest together; no one agency can serve the complex and diverse needs of families.

We are committed to:

Thriving Children and Families

1. Children flourish when (and only when) they have the supports they need.
2. All children deserve access to the programs, services and education that address their individual needs and support equitable outcomes for all children.
3. It is incumbent on us to make accessing needed services as easy as possible, especially for our most vulnerable families.
4. Every parent should be 'invited to the table' to express what they need and how they would like to access it.

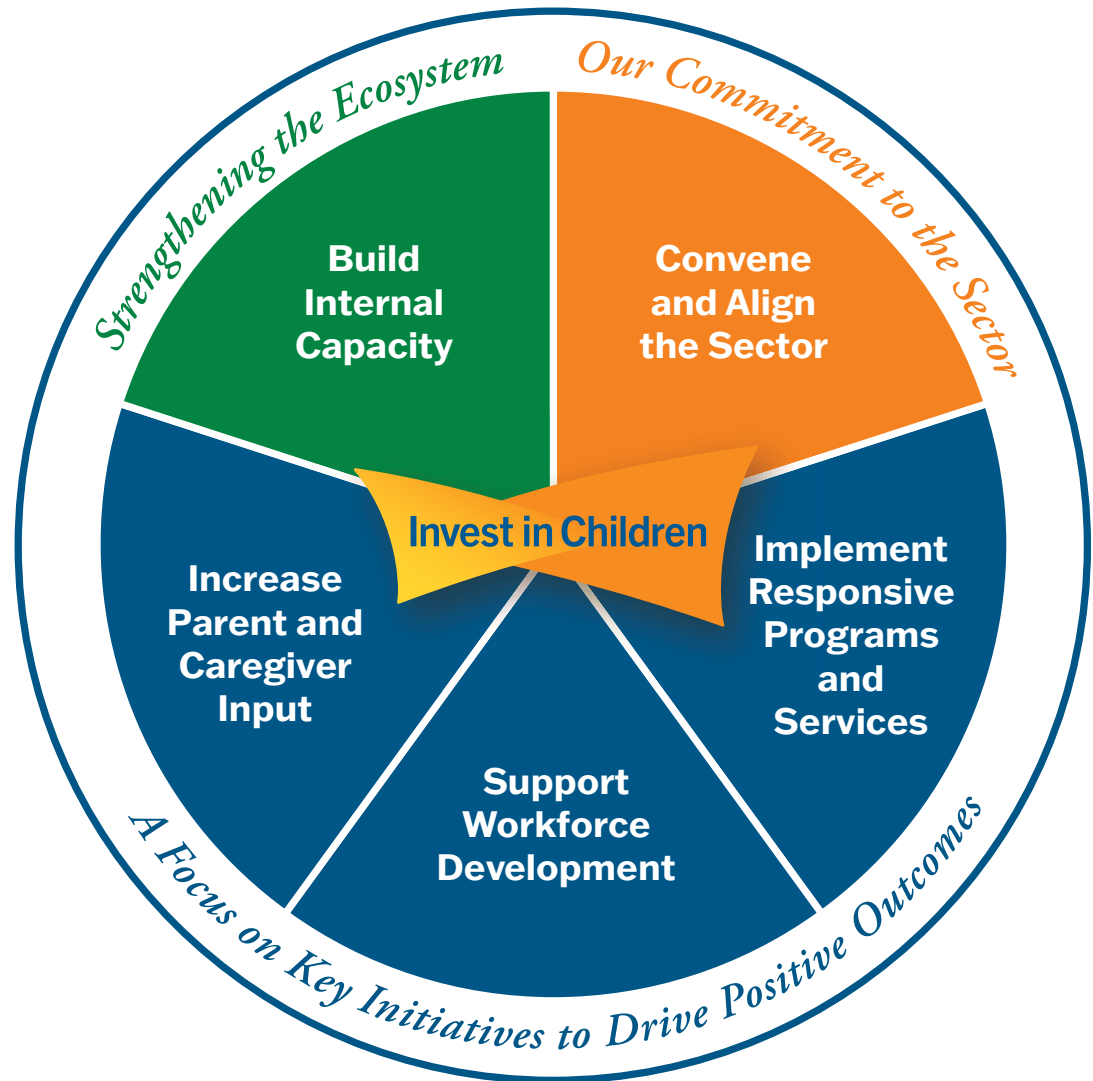
A Robust Early Childhood Sector and a Diverse Network of Community Partners

5. Being part of County government gives us strength and sustainability. Being a public/private partnership gives us the opportunity to better coordinate funding to meet the most urgent community needs.
6. We need a strong network of providers with whom we work in close partnership to set and execute a shared agenda to achieve our community vision and agency mission.
7. Open communication and collaboration is critical to creating, supporting and being a part of the strongest possible early childhood service network.
8. We act as a trusted thought partner to the sector.

Invest in Children as a Strong Coordinating Organization to Support the Sector

9. As a public entity, we are accountable to all residents. As such, we establish shared goals with our agency partners to which we hold ourselves collectively accountable.
10. Data drives our decisions and grounds equitable, innovative solutions that deliver the most positive outcomes for those we serve.
11. We ensure that data is collected, tracked, evaluated and shared transparently across the ecosystem, as part of our public accountability mandate.
12. We are committed to performance management - setting annual goals and accountabilities internally and externally that are consistent with our strategic plan is core to how we operate.

Our plan centers around five goals, each with a specific purpose and focus, that help drive our vision and mission over the three year period.



Our Commitment to the Sector

GOAL 1

Strengthen the Invest in Children public/private partnership to better prioritize and organize the ecosystem of supports and services dedicated to meeting the needs of young children and their families.

Rationale: The County-wide agency partner retreat and additional convenings held in 2023 confirmed not only an emerging set of needs for young families and children, but also the importance of a sector-wide organization to drive the agenda and service provision to overcome barriers to access. Interviews with a broad array of stakeholders during the planning process not only confirmed these findings, but overwhelmingly identified Invest in Children as the organization best able to serve that role. Belief that Invest in Children has the best interests of the County's young children at heart and trust in the motivations, specific skills, experience and qualification of Invest in Children staff were key reasons for this overwhelming mandate. And with new leadership at both the County and Invest in Children level, now is the perfect time for Invest in Children to dedicate itself to the needs that have surfaced: advocating for funding across the public and private sectors, convening service providers and funders, prioritization and County-wide agenda-setting, parent-targeted communication and measurement of impact and outcomes.





A Focus on Key Initiatives to Drive Positive Outcomes

GOAL 2

Launch and expand investments in program and service that are responsive to community needs.

Rationale: Mental health needs among young children in the County were consistently identified as a growing yet under-addressed concern. As such, there is a need to advocate inside and outside of the County infrastructure to fund these services, identify available high-quality services that could be expanded and identify agencies that have the credentials to offer new services. Additionally, programs such as Universal Prekindergarten, FamilySpace and Home Visiting are heavily desired and serve as key connection/entry points to identify additional resources for parents with young children. We believe we can provide an innovative lens to uncover and address the most urgent needs and opportunities.

GOAL 3

Support the current early childhood workforce and advocate for strengthening the pipeline of qualified and trained professionals to better resource needed services and programs provided by agencies across the County.

Rationale: There is a nationally recognized workforce crisis related to staffing services and programs that are desperately needed by young children and families. Cuyahoga County is no exception. While there are many varied systemic issues at the root of this problem that are well beyond our scope as an agency, we believe we can play a role in convening and engaging thought-leaders and partners in discussions to address this critical path issue, and to advocate for innovative workforce/pipeline-building initiatives.

GOAL 4

Increase parent and caregiver input into the creation and delivery of programs and services to advance greater equity in our work and to achieve better outcomes for families.

Rationale: Parent and caregiver input was central to our planning process by design. More than 20 parents were interviewed, representing the largest single stakeholder group. Their desire to provide more input drives our vision, our mission and this goal to amplify the voices of parents and caregivers in establishing desired outcomes, prioritizing services, driving better awareness and improving access to services. We are aligned with our agency and funder stakeholders in our desire to build on the foundation we've established toward a more authentic partnership with families that is more family-centered, engages a more diverse group of parents from all parts of the County, and brings more parents to the table to provide input. Increasing awareness of available services is also critical in advancing equity, and more parent voice can help us better understand where and how parents and caregivers access information. Additionally, it is incumbent upon the full ecosystem to ensure all families can access services easily and through whichever 'door' they use to access the network of services.

“We are incredibly fortunate to have so many programs and resources throughout the County. As a single parent, I rely so much on these programs for my kids. I also really enjoy the opportunity it provides me to connect with other parents. I know from these conversations how thankful we all are!”

- Parent





Strengthening the Ecosystem from the Inside Out

GOAL 5

Build the Capacity of Invest in Children to Achieve these Goals

Rationale: While stakeholders uniformly support Invest in Children's ability to step into an expanded coordinating, convening and organizing role, analysis using external and internal sources reveal gaps to be addressed for the organization's aspirations to be achieved and, ultimately, to best meet the needs of ecosystem partners and young children and parents. Specifically identified needs which our strategies and tactics will address include increased capacity to: document a theory of change for the ecosystem and longitudinal goals related to shared outcomes; consistent collection of data; engage regular independent evaluation, and; report out to the community regularly on progress toward goals and outcomes. Additionally, working through real and perceived public sector bureaucracy will also be addressed.

Why Invest in Children?

“Equity is Key. Every child born in this community should have the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their zip code, their family’s income, or the color of their skin. We need to recognize that all kids are our kids. As a society, we are far from achieving this, and that’s devastating. We invest so little in our children. I want every child born in Cuyahoga County to have a strong start in life and the opportunity to live a great life.”

– Agency Partner

“In Cuyahoga County, not all children are on equal footing. We need to elevate them as much as possible, giving each child an equal start in life, regardless of the household they come from. If we can ensure that every child has a strong foundation, that’s a significant step forward.”

– County Leadership

“We need to give children safe spaces to play, access to clean environments, and schools where they are loved and supported by their teachers. After-school programs and daycares should help children prepare for school and provide a sense of community. We need to nurture them mentally, physically, and emotionally through arts, music, and other wellness activities. Every child should grow up knowing they can be anything and do anything they want.”

– County Leadership

“By respecting and supporting families, we help them guide their children onto a successful trajectory—one that begins before kindergarten and continues through third grade and beyond. Families should be on a path of success alongside their children.”

– Funder

“We need to ensure a healthy start for every family, where they can depend on the resources and support they need for their kids to thrive. That includes physical, mental, emotional, and financial health. It’s about investing in their education, enrichment, and well-being so they can jump to the next level and achieve success in life.”

– Funder

“I also want more direct parent and family involvement in decision-making processes at the systems level. Too often, when we make programmatic decisions with systems leaders, parents and families aren’t at the table, and their voices need to be heard.”

– Agency Partner

Our work begins...together.

Our strategic plan centers around providing the best support to young children and their families. Recognizing the crucial role of early childhood development, we are dedicated to making meaningful and impactful investments in the sector. This commitment is not just about allocating resources but also about building a collaborative environment where the voices of all stakeholders are heard and valued.

To this end, we understand the importance of ongoing engagement with our agency partners, funders, and parents/caregivers of young children.

Effective solutions come from a collective understanding of needs and challenges, which can only be achieved through convening and open dialogue. This approach ensures that our actions are informed by diverse perspectives and are responsive to the evolving needs of our community.

We look forward to this work – to strengthen the early childhood ecosystem and to ensure every child in Cuyahoga County can be **happy, healthy and thriving**.

Thank you to the Cuyahoga County families who attend FamilySpace for the photographs used throughout this book.







Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood - Invest in Children

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