

STRENGTHENING THE GRID



2021 Progress Report



EXCEL
BY EIGHT



Introduction

Excel by Eight's (E8) vision is every child in Arkansas receives quality health care and education. By providing children with a strong start to life, we can help ensure they are born healthy and full-term; receive well-child visits, developmental screenings, and needed follow-up services; participate in a home visiting program with their caregivers; attend quality early childhood programs; start kindergarten ready to learn; and read on grade-level by third grade.

Across Arkansas, there are already programs and practices designed to help children, starting from birth, achieve their full educational and health potential, including physical, mental, and oral health. Unfortunately, the grid of resources families need are often unevenly distributed, making it difficult for them to access these critical health, family, education, and community supports.

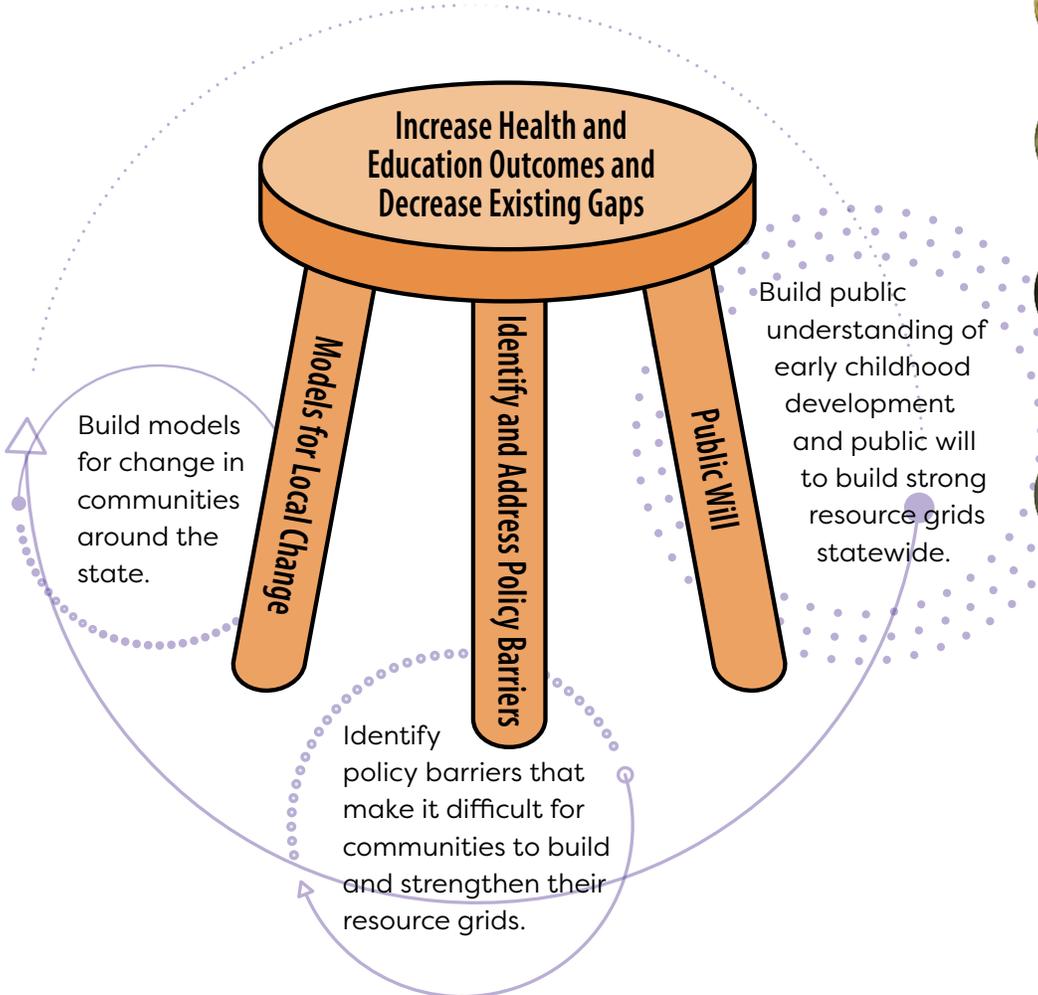
Today, nearly 12% of births in Arkansas are preterm. Black babies are the most likely to be born preterm at 16.6%, followed by white babies at 10.5% and Hispanic babies at 10.2%.¹ Only 10% of infants and toddlers have access to high-quality child care,² and less than half of three and four year olds are enrolled in pre-K.³ By third grade, just 30% of students meet the reading readiness benchmark on the ACT Aspire. For some children, rates are even lower. Only 15% of Black third graders and 23% of Hispanic third graders met the benchmark, compared to 37% of white students.⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic only elevated the disparities. Despite these challenges, we remain committed to increasing children's health and education outcomes by partnering with our local E8 communities, promoting the E8 Foundations' policy work and building public support around the importance of the earliest years of a child's life. We call this our three-legged stool.

The E8 Foundations Collaborative made significant progress towards its goal to increase the number of pregnant women, infants, and toddlers receiving high-quality health and education services by more than 35,000 and to close the gaps between demographic subgroups by 2025. Since 2020, the number of infants and toddlers served by high quality health care, home visiting, and early childhood education programs has jumped by more than 4,000.

We launched two E8 communities in Pulaski and Union counties. Virtual meetings and drive-through data walks allowed us to ramp up and further planning efforts to begin and continue in all E8 communities.

Now, Excel by Eight is continuing our efforts to transform our state's systems, so families and communities can overcome barriers that prevent children from achieving their full potential.



Excel by Eight Team

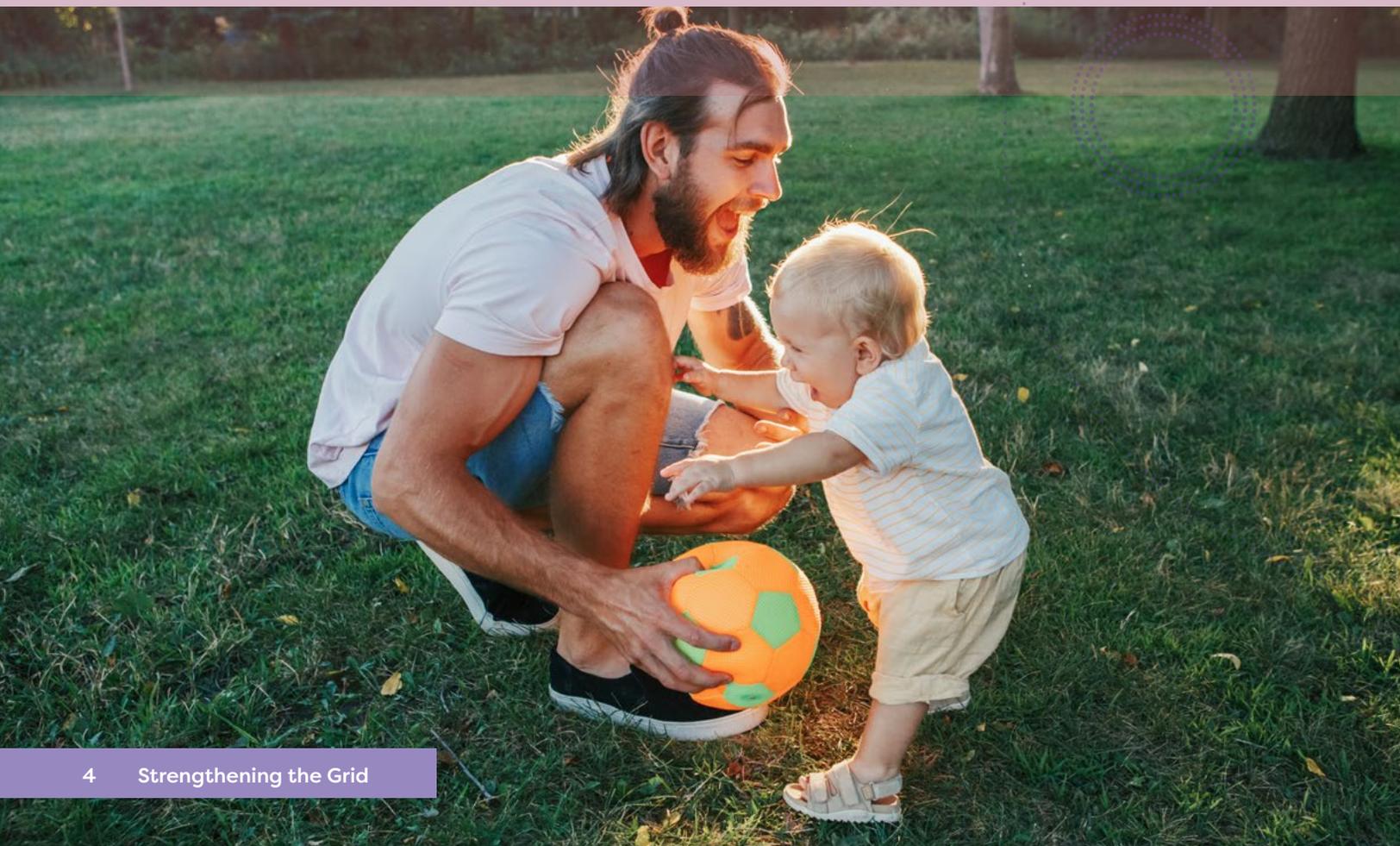
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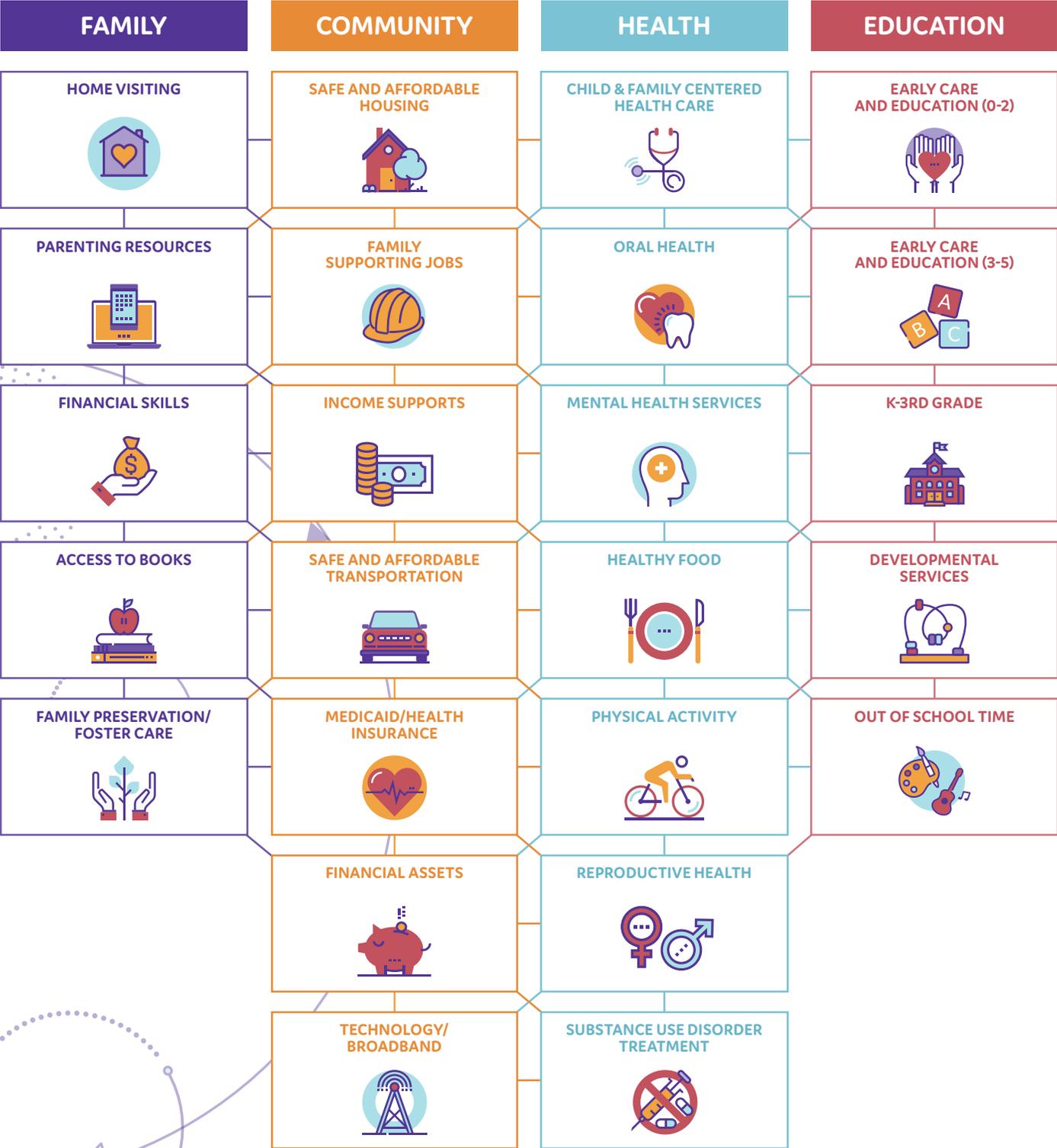
The Grid

The array of resources children and families need operates like a power grid. Some parts may be incomplete or malfunctioning, or the connections may be frayed or broken altogether.

Resources like high-quality learning opportunities; healthy food;

physical and mental health services; safe housing; and supportive relationships help children reach their full potential. An unreliable or patchy flow of resources can result in a range of developmental delays, with long-lasting consequences for children's health and well-being. When all families and communities are equally plugged in, children have what they need to thrive.







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Excel by Eight Foundations

Research consistently shows the brain develops faster from birth to age three than any other period in life with more than one million new neural connections forming every second - building the foundation for future learning, behavior, and health.

Parents play a lead role in healthy development, but many are stretched in the earliest months and years of their child's life. A child's experiences in the first three years are the bricks and mortar of brain development. A sturdy brain architecture becomes the foundation for core social emotional intelligence, early executive functioning and self-regulation, and literacy—skills that are all critical for later health and success. It's not only infants, toddlers, and families who benefit when we start early—it's entire communities. When we invest in the first three years of a child's life, we build a strong foundation for their future learning, behavior, and health and reduce the need for more expensive interventions later.

The Excel by Eight Foundations (E8F) Collaborative's policy agenda builds on existing research and knowledge of how to best support families with infants and toddlers. We want children to have healthy beginnings and families to feel supported and have access to high-quality child care and early learning experiences.

Over the past year, E8F has built momentum for our policy agenda and secured resources to help advance our three policy categories: Healthy Beginnings, Supported Families, and High Quality Child Care and Early Learning.



Healthy Beginnings

A healthy beginning starts before birth. Expectant mothers need access to comprehensive prenatal and postnatal care, screenings and services to ensure infants are born safely and continue to thrive. Infants also need access to ongoing well-child visits, developmental screenings, and any follow-up specialty care, therapy services, or social supports.

Learn the Signs. Act Early.

Understanding and tracking developmental milestones is the first step to early identification of children's developmental delays and disabilities. The CDC's "Learn the Signs. Act Early." (LTSAE) program provides free educational resources and tools for parents and caregivers to track their child's progress and pinpoint early concerns.

The Arkansas Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics (ARAAP), in partnership with University of Arkansas Partners for Inclusive Communities and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, was awarded a grant from the Association of University Centers on Disabilities and the CDC's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities to improve the use of the CDC's LTSAE. ARAAP completed a needs assessment with early identification and intervention stakeholders. Then it developed a navigation tool to help families and physicians navigate the systems and services that can help children develop and thrive. ARAAP also educated medical professionals on the early intervention system and how to use it.

HealthySteps®

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends infants receive eight well-child visits in their first 15 months of life. These appointments allow health care providers to monitor their development and recommend early interventions, as needed. In Arkansas, nearly 90% of infants and toddlers on Medicaid had at least one pediatric checkup in 2019, making physician offices an ideal location to reach many low-income families.

HealthySteps®, a ZERO TO THREE program, focuses on connecting infants and toddlers, particularly those in low-income communities, with early childhood development support through physician's offices. Participating physician offices hire HealthySteps® Specialists who are dedicated to developing relationships with families, so practices can better identify and meet children's needs. HealthySteps® offices offer child development and family needs screenings to patients and their families. If therapies or resources are needed, the specialists coordinate the appropriate care and support. Families who have been through trauma or have high needs will receive team-based office visits.

In Arkansas, local funders supported a seven-site HealthySteps® demonstration, which aims to begin serving children in January 2022. Arkansas Children's (AC) was granted \$1.5 million from the Blue & You Foundation and is supporting clinics in Fort Smith, Hot Springs, Jonesboro, and Little Rock. The Arkansas Community Foundation received a \$665,000 grant from the Walmart Foundation. The Arkansas Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics (ARAAP) will manage the funds to support three clinics in Little Rock, Rogers, and Springdale. As collaborators, AC and ARAAP spent the summer and fall laying the groundwork for the project.

Supported Families

Infants and toddlers need quality health care, stimulating learning opportunities, and nurturing, responsive relationships for healthy development. A system of support should be in place at or before birth to ensure every child and parent receives the needed information, assessments, and referrals for a strong start. Home visiting programs are a key strategy for providing these resources.

Expanding Home Visiting with ARHOME

Home visiting is a voluntary program that takes place in the homes of families with young children. Caregivers are matched with trained providers from their own communities, such

as educators, nurses, or social workers. During these regular visits, providers focus on enhancing prenatal care; strengthening the parent-child relationship; promoting early learning; or identifying and addressing potential health and developmental issues.

In an effort to provide additional services to vulnerable populations, Arkansas requested a new waiver for the state's Medicaid expansion, called Arkansas Health and Opportunity for Me (ARHOME). ARHOME helps improve health outcomes through three Life360 Homes. Through the Maternal Life360 Home, birthing hospitals may offer evidence-based home visitation services to at-risk pregnant women, continuing until the child is two. If approved by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, ARHOME has the potential to serve 5,000 new women and their babies a year, but initial estimates are closer to 2,000.



High Quality Child Care and Early Learning

High-quality child care must be accessible and affordable. Whether it's in a center or through a home-based program, stimulating learning opportunities and nurturing, responsive relationships are crucial to healthy brain development.

American Rescue Plan

The child care industry is critical to our economy's success. It helps parents enter and remain in the workforce. And it supports caregivers who decide to seek additional education or job training. Even before COVID-19, early care and education providers were operating on razor thin margins. To help them survive—and to stimulate recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic—Congress passed the American Rescue Plan (ARP). \$39 billion was included in the \$1.9 trillion plan for child care.

Arkansas's share is \$464 million. The Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education received approval from the legislature to allocate more than \$250 million to stabilize child care with funds for operational support, investing in higher quality and expanding in rural areas serving infants and toddlers and/or out-of-school time care for school age children. The state designated an additional \$25 million to increase the supply of child care and \$130 million will continue to provide child care for essential workers.

\$40 million of ARP funding will expand the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood Scholarship

Program. T.E.A.C.H. is a national, evidence-based program, which came to Arkansas in 2019 and is administered by the Arkansas Early Childhood Association. It helps full-time teachers, directors, and family child care providers achieve their higher education and career goals by providing counseling; financial support for tuition, books, and travel expenses; and paid release time from work. This increased funding will allow more than 300 educators to participate in T.E.A.C.H. annually through 2024.

Supporting Family Child Care

The Family Child Care Network (FCCN) is supported by the University of Arkansas, Early Care and Education Projects with the goal of increasing licensed homes, quality levels, and infant and toddler slots. FCCN provides monthly training on subjects identified by providers; helps them navigate the licensing process, Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS), and professional development; and assists them to achieve the National Association of Family Child Care Accreditation. The Arkansas Community Foundation made a grant to FCCN for a Wellness Coach to provide mental health support for family child care providers, so they can continue to provide quality care and stay in the early childhood field.

The Business Case for Child Care

In late 2020, nine chambers of commerce and economic development organizations and eight philanthropic organizations convened the Arkansas Early Childhood Education Task Force. The group assessed current challenges and considered long-term, systemic improvements to develop recommendations and an action plan for an inclusive and equitable early childhood education system. The recommendations will be released in early 2022.



Arkansas Early Childhood Education Task Force

Arkansas Community Foundation

Arkansas Community Foundation's Northwest
Arkansas Philanthropy Club

Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist
Church

Arkansas Impact Philanthropy

Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce

Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce

Central Arkansas Library System

Clinton Foundation

Conway Area Chamber of Commerce

Economic Development Alliance
for Jefferson County

Excellerate Foundation

Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce

Greater Bentonville Area Chamber
of Commerce

Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce

Mississippi County Economic Development
Commission

Morrilton Area Chamber of Commerce

Northwest Arkansas Council

Rogers-Lowell Chamber of Commerce

The Ross Foundation

Springdale Chamber of Commerce

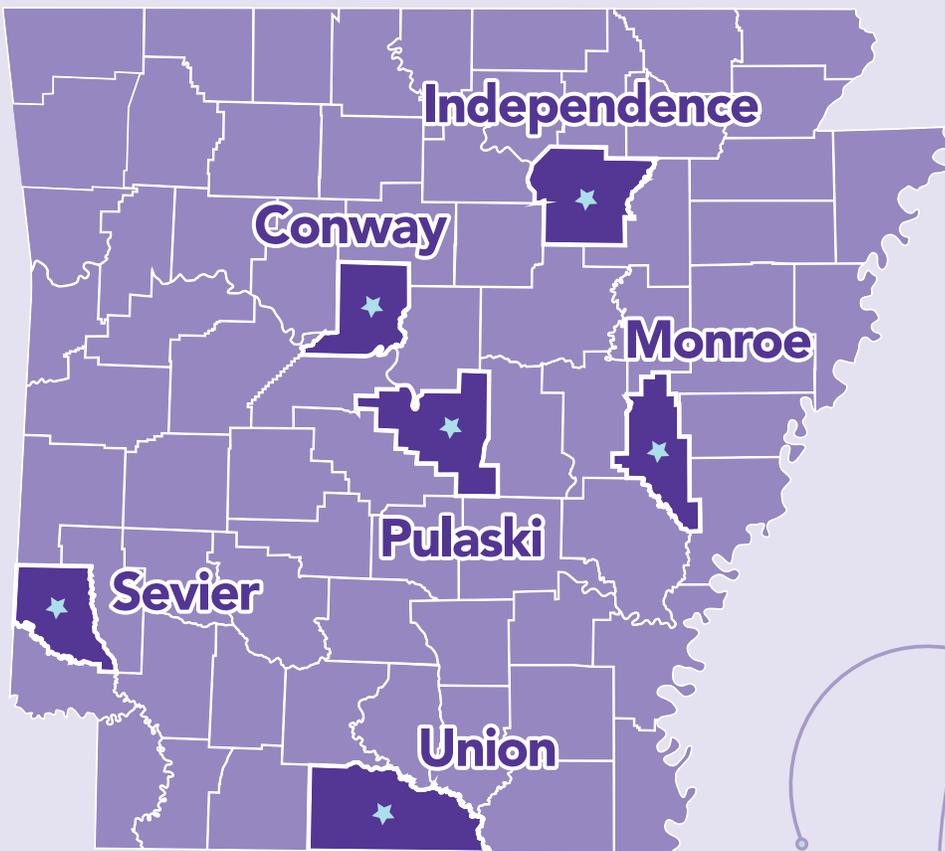
Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

Women's Foundation of Arkansas



Local Communities

Building and supporting local models for change allows Excel by Eight (E8) to highlight community successes and identify policy barriers that can be addressed at the state level. Every E8 Community is at a different stage in their planning and implementation. However, each local steering committee has assessed available resources and gathered input from residents as part of the process. In addition to the communities below, Monroe County is currently evaluating its resource grid to determine how best to improve outcomes for children birth to age eight.



Conway County

One in four children in Arkansas has untreated cavities or tooth decay, which can lead to problems with eating, speaking, playing, and learning.

In September 2020, Healthy Smiles launched as a partnership between Curricula Concepts, Excel by Eight (E8) and the local E8 steering committee, with funding from Delta Dental of Arkansas Foundation. It is focused on expanding oral health knowledge among early educators, community leaders, and families, with the goal of connecting families to local dentists and easing barriers to regular dental care.

Seven early care and education centers in Conway County adopted pro oral health policies, such as offering water instead of juice or providing families information on good oral hygiene. Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and Community Services, Inc., a non-profit family service provider, are also participating in these efforts.

Conway County is engaging local dentists in making direct connections with centers and community partners to further smooth families' paths to dental care. By strengthening its local network and focusing on oral health as a community, the hope is more children will access preventive care and treatment.

In addition to oral health, the Conway County Steering Committee is setting goals to address early literacy, child care, and child hunger.

Conway County Steering Committee:

Robbie Belew, Curricula Concepts

John Gibson, Conway County Community Foundation

Kathy Gipson, Community Services, Inc.

Shandee Gordon, Wonderview School District

Shawn Halbrook, South Conway County School District

Lora Hendrix, South Conway County School District

Stephanie Lipsmeyer, Morrilton Area Chamber of Commerce

Michelle Mallett, Conway County Juvenile Probation and Arkansas Coalition for Juvenile Justice

Dr. Susan Okroglic, Community Services, Inc.

Kaila Parker, Parent

Jamie Stacks, Wonderview School District

Karey Tapley, South Conway County School District

Joy Trauth, Retired Teacher, Grandparent

Logan Williams, Nemo Vista School District



Independence County

Combining public input and Early Development Instrument (EDI) data, the Independence County Steering Committee set goals around language and literacy; child care availability; social competence and emotional maturity; physical development; and oral health. In 2020, Independence County's four school districts were awarded the Comprehensive Literacy

State Development grant to purchase new curricula aligned with the science of reading and to help foster a culture of reading throughout the community. Each district made innovative investments to increase access to books for students and families, a key strategy that emerged during the Excel by Eight planning process.



Independence County has also prioritized their child care goal with funding allocated to Arkansas through the American Rescue Plan. To maximize these resources, steering committee members have engaged local child care providers to apply for operational and quality improvement funding. They'll also help these entities prepare proposals for subsequent funding to pursue innovative ideas that could transform the field. Providers are currently considering several strategies, such as initiating shared services to make their business models more sustainable. Other centers are seeking public-private partnerships to expand the capacity for infant and toddler care.

Independence County Steering Committee

Jennifer Douglas, Batesville School District

Amy Finster, White River Health System

Jessica Gilmer, Midland Preschool

Mary-Katherine Hardin, STARS Academy

Novella Humphrey, Southside School District

Kristie Jenkins, ARCare

Crystal Johnson, Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce

Abbi Limbaugh, Cedar Ridge School District

Whitney Massey, Baker Family Dentistry

Lisa Mcghee, Southside Schools

Bani Meharg, Midland Elementary

Dr. Lesley Milton, Tooth Be Told Pediatric Dentistry

Debbie Mize, Child Care Aware

Kimberly Poole, Southside School District

Michelle Puckett, Batesville Preschool

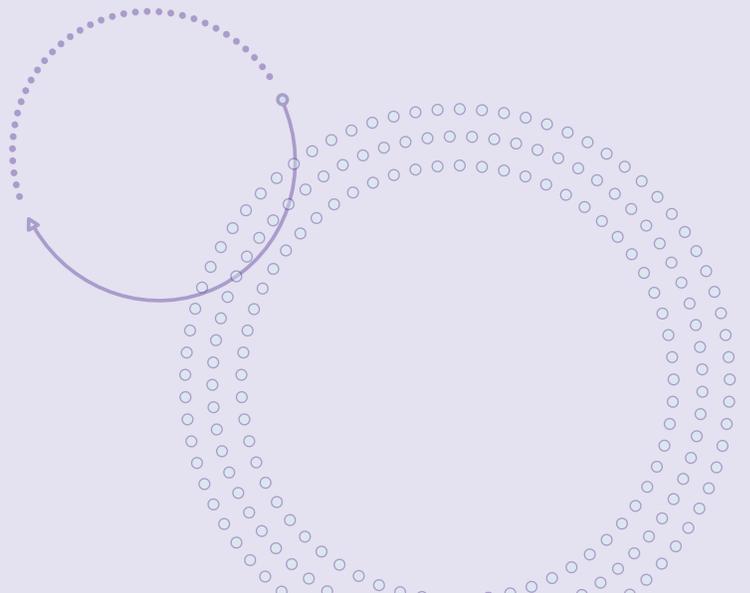
Jamie Rayford, Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce

Dr. Julia Roulier, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

Mindy Shaw, University of Arkansas Community College Batesville

Brooke Stevenson, Parent

Dr. Nikki Yonts, Lyon College



Pulaski County

In Pulaski County, E8 is narrower in scope, focusing mostly on the capital city. Its steering committee is led by Dr. Jay Barth, the City of Little Rock's Chief Education Officer. E8 is one of four committees on Mayor Frank Scott's Lifelong Learning Cabinet.

The steering committee completed virtual and in-person data walks to identify local needs and priorities. It also took into account the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a population measure of how children are developing based on the five domains of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge.

The steering committee is currently setting goals related to broadband access, quality k-3 education, infant/toddler care, healthy food, reproductive health and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).



Pulaski County Steering Committee

Sarah Argue, Pulaski County Imagination Library

Natalie Baber, Our House

Patty Barker, Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance

Dr. Jay Barth, City of Little Rock

Larry Clark, Life Skills for Youth

Ryan Davis, Children's International

Lisa Donovan, Central Arkansas Library System

Kathy French, AR Kids Read

Sandra Galvan, Mexican Consulate

Tyra Greenwood, Arkansas Home Visiting Network

Arisbeth Johnson, Alas/Wings

Esther Jones, Little Rock School District, Early Childhood Education

David Kuchinski, Centers for Youth and Families

Tiffany Lepard, Foster Parent

Desirae McBride, Our House

Jacqueline McEuen, Little Rock School District, School Health

Mike Ramirez, Hope Credit Union

Al Richardson, Life Skills for Youth

Rhonda Sanders, Arkansas Foodbank

Ray Scott, Health Information Technology

Anna Strong, Arkansas Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics

Wendy Ward, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

LeCole White, SafeCare

Sevier County

In its initial research and data gathering phase, Sevier County identified physical activity as a top priority for the local community. Since the onset of COVID-19, this focus has become even more important. Partners in Horatio are exploring how to transform existing public spaces into family-friendly learning and play places. In addition to a new walking trail at Hendrix Park, the city received a grant from Save the Children, a national organization focused on early childhood wellbeing, to install equipment and signage promoting kindergarten readiness in the areas of motor skill development and social-emotional competency. The city matched the funding to cover materials and equipment to make the parks accessible for all ages and abilities.

Sevier County Steering Committee

Erika Buenrostro, University of Arkansas
Cossatot Community College

Cheryl Byrd, De Queen-Mena Educational
Service Cooperative

Janet Cantrell, University of Arkansas
Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension

Sherry Dinger, Parkhill Preschool

Deborah Hedge, Sevier County Health Unit

Kimberly Johnson, Little Bitty City
Enrichment Center

Kim Kennemore, De Queen-Mena
Educational Service Cooperative

Debbi Neal, Horatio City Council

Mary Runnels, Department of Human
Services

Amy Smith, Horatio School District

Beth Tody, Horatio School District

Angie Walker, Dr. Randy Walker Family
Practice & Allergy Clinic



Union County

Union County demonstrates how collaboration leads to better outcomes for children and families. The local steering committee is led by two local non-profits: the SHARE Foundation and the United Way of Union County. These organizations leveraged their strengths and connections to

gather county-wide input on what boxes of the grid are most important to citizens. In addition to community input from data walks, the steering committee is also considering data from the Early Development Instrument (EDI) which was completed by all school districts in 2020.

Union County Steering Committee

Alexis Alexander, United Way of Union County

Gloria Billings, Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services

Pam Blake, FACT, Inc.

Wanda Corney, Parents as Teachers

Becky Dixon, Smackover-Norphlet School District

Karen Hicks, The Call Support Center

Heidi Klappenbach, Family Connects

Robin Krneta, South Arkansas Children's Coalition

Ellen Lowe, Junction City School District

Kathy Love, Hannah Pregnancy Resource Center

Debbie McAdams, El Dorado School District

Emily O'Neal, Arkansas Children's

Kaitlyn Rigdon, El Dorado-Union County Chamber of Commerce

Carl Sivils, Jr., Southern Bancorp

Martha Garrett-Shaver, Family Medicine

Tequila Smith, FACT, Inc.

Kimberly Thomas, Strong-Huttig School District

Debbie Watts, SHARE Foundation

Rev. Larry Yarbrough, Sr., CIRCLE Initiative Foundation

Shaneil "PJ" Yarbrough, University of Arkansas, College of Education, Early Care and Education Projects



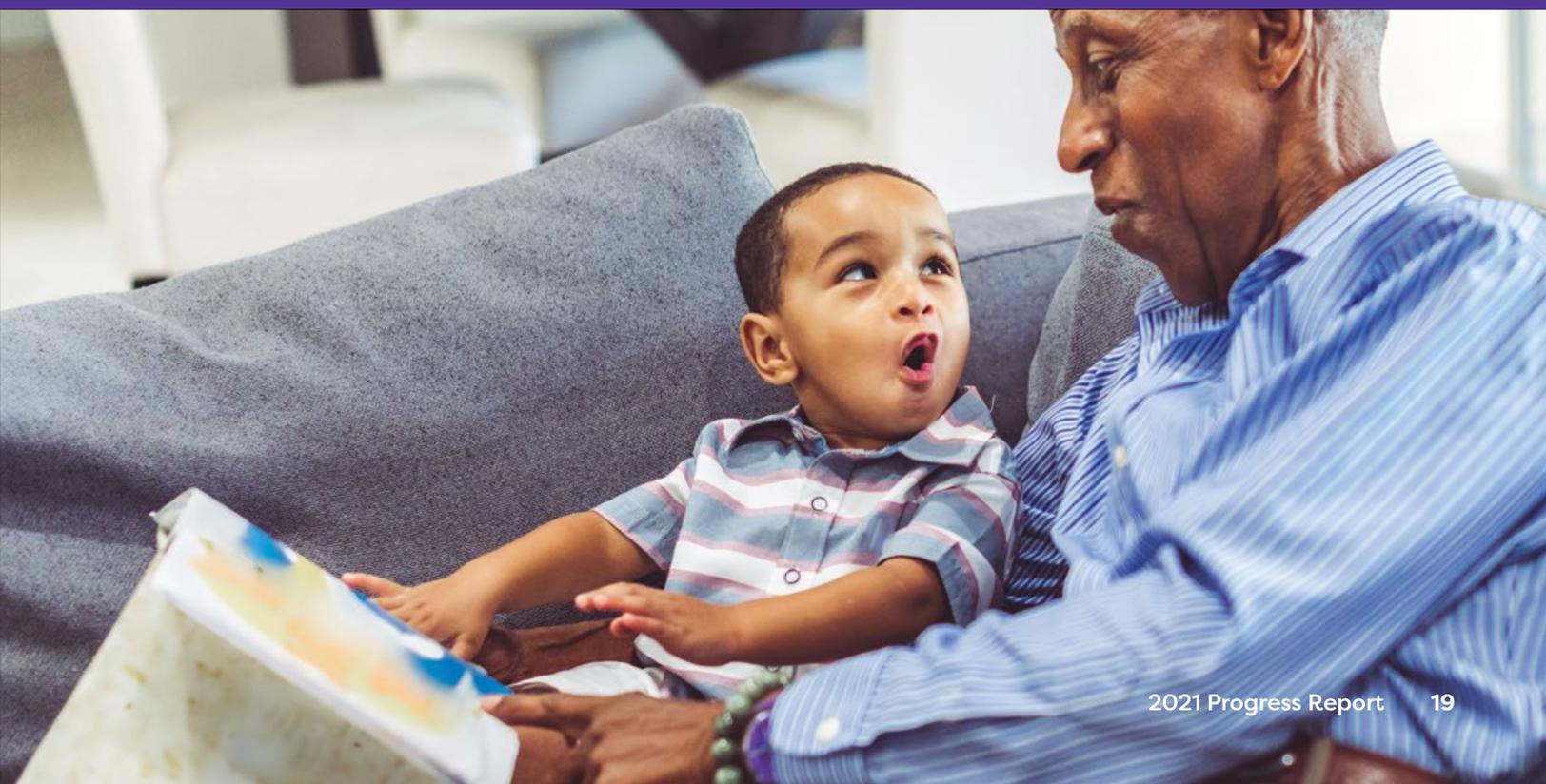
Excel by Eight Milestones

FAMILY		BASELINE	PROGRESS	GOAL
	Number of funded home visiting slots ⁵	2018-19 8,221	2020-21 8,751	2030 30,000
	Children receiving books through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library ⁶	2019 30,031/month	2021 50,893/month	2030 191,000/month

COMMUNITY		BASELINE	PROGRESS	GOAL
	Children (0-18) under 200% of poverty that are uninsured ⁷	2019 5.9%	2019 5.9%	2030 5.6%

HEALTH		BASELINE	PROGRESS	GOAL
	Medicaid recipients 3, 4 and 5 years of age who had one or more well-child visits with a PCP during year ⁸	2017 54%	2019 64%	2030 57%
	Medicaid recipients birth to 5 who received any dental or oral health service ⁹	2018 28%	2019 37%	2030 29%
	Medicaid recipients receiving dyadic mental health services ¹⁰	2018-19 N/A	2020-21 N/A	2030 TBD
	Statewide ratio of free and reduced-price school breakfast to lunch participation ¹¹	2018-19 67%	2019-20 68%	2030 70%
	Child food insecurity rate ¹²	2017 23%	2019 21%	2030 20%
	6th, 8th, 10th, & 12th graders that ever used any drug, including alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, and other illegal drugs ¹³	2018 20%	2020 19%	2030 18.5%

EDUCATION	BASELINE	PROGRESS	GOAL
 <p>Child care vouchers paying for a slot in a Level 3 Better Beginnings rated program¹⁴</p>	<p>2018-19</p> <p>Infants & Toddlers: 2,086</p> <p>3-5-year olds: 3,649</p>	<p>2020-21</p> <p>Infants & Toddlers: 3,979</p> <p>3-5-year olds: 6,137</p>	<p>2030</p> <p>All vouchers pay for slots in Level 3 programs.</p>
 <p>Children receiving at least one ASQ or Brigance screen at 9, 18, and 30 months and autism screen at 18 and 24 (or 30 months)</p>	<p>2019</p> <p>NR</p>	<p>2020</p> <p>NR</p>	<p>2030</p> <p>32,025 35%</p>
 <p>3rd graders meeting reading readiness benchmark on the state assessment, the ACT Aspire¹⁵</p>	<p>2018-19</p> <p>38%</p>	<p>2020-21</p> <p>30.4%</p>	<p>2030</p> <p>80%</p>
 <p>4th graders reading at proficient or above according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress¹⁶</p>	<p>2019</p> <p>31%</p> <p>Arkansas ranks 42nd</p>	<p>2021</p> <p>N/A</p>	<p>2030</p> <p>Arkansas ranks in the top 25 states</p>
 <p>Students receiving dyslexia interventions¹⁷</p>	<p>2018-19</p> <p>4.8%</p>	<p>2020-21</p> <p>5.8%</p>	<p>2030</p> <p>20%</p>





Excel by Eight Steering Committee

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Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

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Patty Barker

Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance

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Bill Kopsky

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Mike Mertens

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Arkansas Imagination Library

Kiffany Pride

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Division of Elementary and Secondary Education

Dr. Chad Rodgers

Arkansas Foundation for Medical Care

Rhonda Sanders

Arkansas Foodbank

Laveta Wills-Hale

Arkansas Out of School Network

Candace Williams

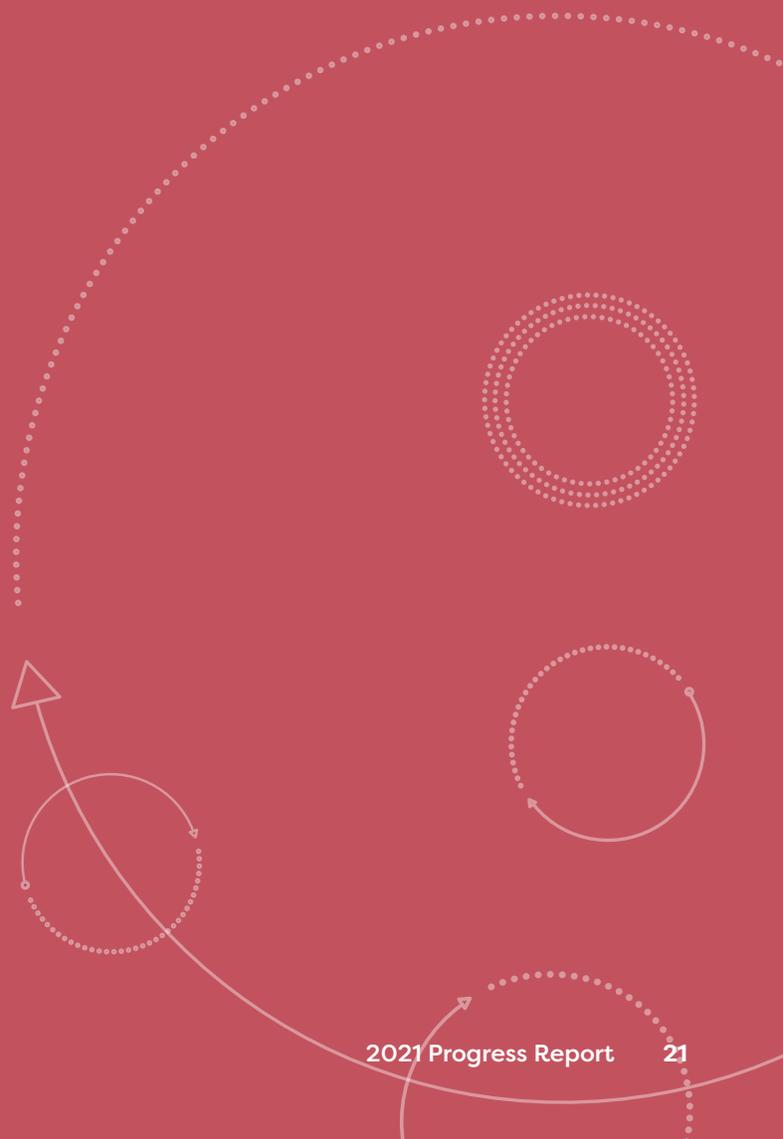
Rural Community Alliance

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Arkansas Department of Education
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Marisha DiCarlo, Arkansas Children's

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Andrew Forsman, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

Audrey Freshwater, Save the Children

Olivia Gardner, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

Rep. Denise Garner, Arkansas House of Representatives

John Gibson, South Conway County School District

Janie Ginocchio, Southern Bancorp

Jackie Govan, Arkansas Head Start State Collaboration Office

Tyra Greenwood, Arkansas Home Visiting Network, Arkansas Children's

Scott Hamilton, The Urban League of the State of Arkansas

Mary-Katherine Hardin, STARS Academy

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Rich Huddleston, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

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Dr. Lesley Milton, Tooth Be Told

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Shaneca Smith, Arkansas Foundation for Medical Care

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Sandra Withers, Healthy Child Care Arkansas

Leeann Woodrum, Arkansas Children's Care Network



EXCEL
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Take Action

Families, businesses, policymakers, and community leaders can help strengthen resource grids in Arkansas to give children a strong start.



Families

- Make sure the children in your life receive their well-child check ups and developmental screens at their 9, 18, and 30 month visits
- Visit the Better Beginnings website, arbetterbeginnings.com, to find quality early childhood programs for your children or extended family members
- Track your child's milestones with the CDC's "Learn the Signs. Act Early." tools at cdc.gov/milestones

Communities

- Develop partnerships to expand home visiting services
- Develop partnerships among early childhood education providers, schools, and local dentists to ensure children receive preventive oral health care and treatment
- Work with mental health providers in your community to make sure they are providing dyadic mental health services for young children and their caregivers

Policymakers

- Ensure young children receive developmental and autism screenings and services they need to reach their full potential
- Increase the quality of early childhood education programs
- Make child care affordable for families

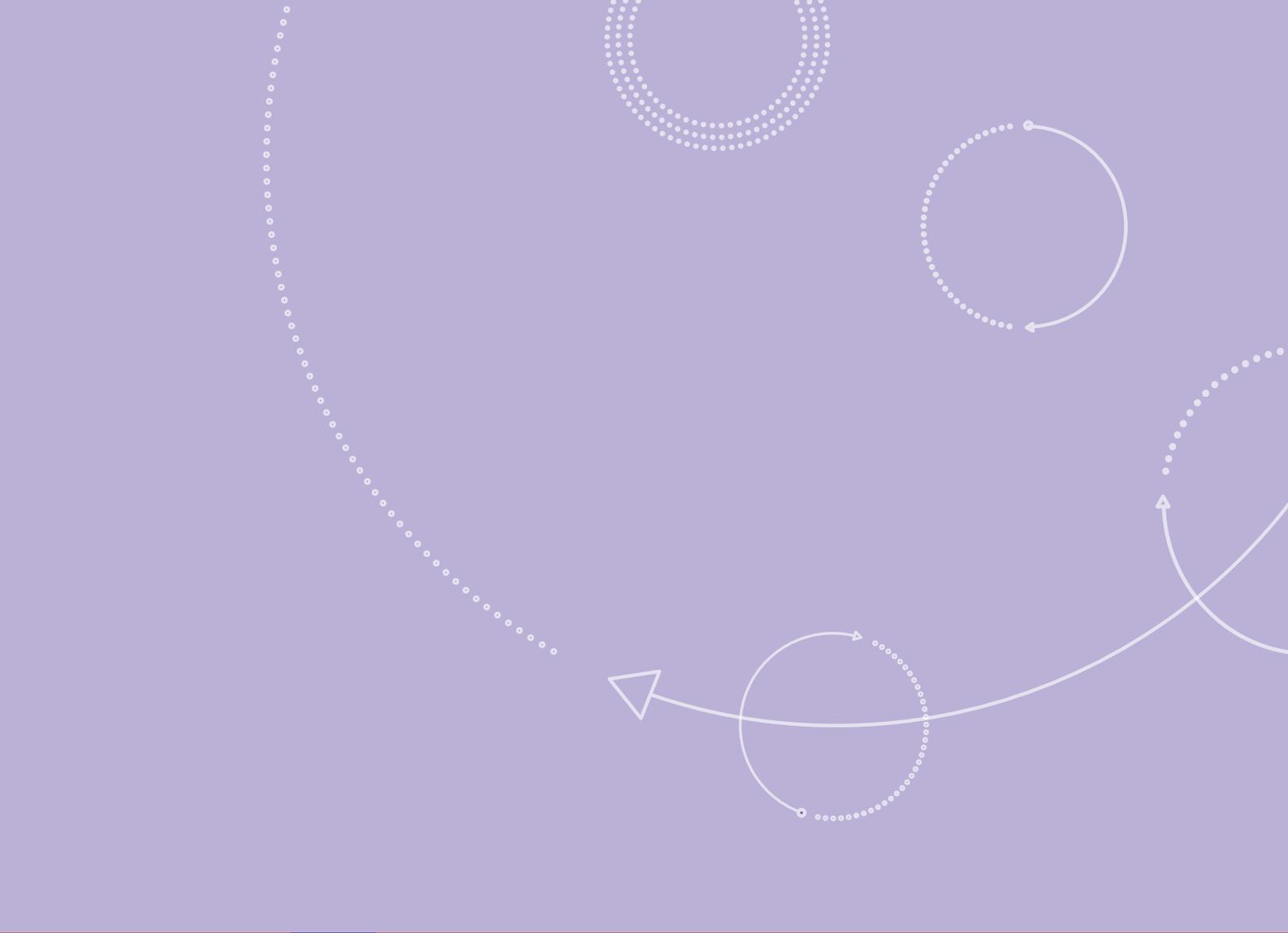




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1. State of Babies Yearbook, 2021 <https://stateofbabies.org/state/arkansas/>
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