



Strong Start Community Grant

OVERVIEW

Made possible by Indiana's Preschool Development Grant
Powered by Early Learning Indiana





A CRITICAL TRANSITION

A smooth transition into kindergarten creates a foundation for children to build upon throughout the rest of their K-12 journey. Without the right supports, the shift from early environments to kindergarten can be a significant challenge. When communities strengthen the connective experience between early learning and the start of kindergarten, they ease the stress of transition, setting children up for effective experiences. Additionally, parents, early learning programs and K-12 systems benefit from effective transitions, aligning children's experiences and their own expectations to support children. Effective transitions reduce academic fadeout, improve academic outcomes, encourage family involvement and allow children to navigate a significant period of adjustment.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Across the country, cities and states have been crafting and implementing innovative approaches to supporting the transition. With this national momentum rising, the Strong Start Community grant provides towns and cities throughout Indiana with the opportunity to expand local kindergarten transition practices. Through this grant, communities can apply for funding to plan and implement practices to support the transition. Indiana's Preschool Development Grant, awarded to Indiana FSSA's Office of Early Childhood and Out-of-School-Learning in January 2019, supports a formal evaluation of the state's birth-to-5 early childhood education programs and strategic planning to strengthen them. The Strong Start Community grant builds upon these efforts.

BACKGROUND

In summer and fall 2019, funded by Indiana's Preschool Development Grant, Early Learning Indiana conducted a multi-stage initiative to highlight and expand effective kindergarten transition practices in the state. This effort included a national landscape review to identify best practices in other states, a competition to solicit local innovation, and the identification of a new model for activating communities to support kindergarten transitions.

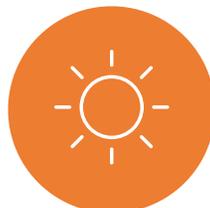


LANDSCAPE REVIEW

The national landscape review compiled a range of leading state- and local-level practices.

Through this review, key takeaways and considerations emerged that are relevant for Indiana communities. Noteworthy approaches include:

- Cross-sector, community-wide prioritization of kindergarten preparation
- Transition guide plans and mandates
- Summer programming to boost readiness for at-risk groups
- Data sharing
- Joint professional development opportunities to plan and assess transition efforts
- Family and community engagement, with family programs the year before and during kindergarten



HOOSIER BEST PRACTICES



Complementing the national review, an effort to identify best practices from within Hoosier communities, the Strong Start for Kindergarten Prize competition, was launched. Hosted by Early Learning Indiana, the competition invited schools, early learning programs and community organizations to share their kindergarten transition efforts.

Representing 24 counties, the 55 submissions were evaluated on their correlation to national research on early learning, innovation, ability to demonstrate measurable outcomes, and potential for replication. Nine recipients were selected and awarded between \$5,000 and 25,000 for their high-impact kindergarten transition practices.

Leading Indiana practices include:

- Use of technology and social media to engage families;
- Use of materials in multiple languages and special translation equipment to encourage inclusivity;
- Kindergarten “kick-offs” and other interventions for at-risk children with no preschool or pre-K experience;
- Transition toolkits that include videos, surveys and engagement activities for families;
- Cross-observation and debrief opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers; and
- Year-round kindergarten readiness programs and engagement activities for children





GRANT OPPORTUNITY



The Strong Start Community seeks to expand understanding of this essential transition while activating Indiana communities to support children's success.

Through the Preschool Development Grant funds, Indiana seeks to identify 15 communities to build a locally driven plan for kindergarten transition. These plans will be informed by national and local best practices. By applying to this grant, communities agree to utilize the criteria outlined below, which reflects emergent and proven practices aligned with child outcomes.

APPLICATION PROCESS



A total of 15 Indiana communities will receive up to \$25,000 grants to create and begin to implement a plan to become a Strong Start Community. All Indiana communities are eligible to apply.

Successful submissions must include a letter of intent from an executive champion at a lead organization such as a K-12 district or board, United Way or community foundation. Letters of intent should include:

- Name and mission statement of lead organization
- Names, titles and organizations for all members of community planning team
- Synopsis of community need
- Potential impact of striving towards criteria
- Description of how this effort builds on or integrates with other community efforts (existing kindergarten readiness efforts, K-12 strategic plans, economic development goals, etc.)
- Description of how you expect to leverage partners in the community to build a robust plan
- Perceived community strengths and gaps related to the criteria

Additionally, applicants must submit two letters of support from other members of the community planning team to demonstrate cross-sector participation and partnership between public and private entities. These letters can be from an elected official, early learning provider representative (either school or community-based), local early learning coalition leaders, chamber or local economic development group leaders, community or business partner, or families.





PLAN CRITERIA

Aligning with best practices, participating communities will address specific criteria inspired by identified state and national best practices, including:

Community participation

- Key stakeholder representation within transition team including (at minimum): early learning providers, K-12 district leadership, kindergarten teachers, community organizations and/or elected leaders, and families
- Formalized public and private partnership(s) forged in support of plan

Shared ownership between early childhood providers and K-12 stakeholders

- Joint participation by early childhood and K-12 stakeholders in planning process with presence of jointly and separately owned activities explicitly stated in plan

Teacher engagement

- At least one opportunity for pre-K and kindergarten teachers to shadow each other's learning environments
- At least one joint professional development offering for pre-K and kindergarten teachers to learn, discuss and plan

Child and family readiness supports

- At least 75% of incoming children and families engaged in meaningful activities
- Identification of at least one at-risk population and targeting at least one high-impact engagement activity
- Involvement of families in the planning and execution of efforts

Data utilization

- Conduct cross-functional discussion with stakeholders around readiness data at least once a year
- Incorporate at least one best practice data-driven strategy into the local plan

LEARN MORE & KEY DATES



Next steps and the grant timeline

Interested community teams and affiliated organizations will have the opportunity to participate in one of two webinars on December 17 to learn more about the grant criteria before the deadline to submit a letter of intent on December 20. Winning submissions will be notified by the end of December. The 15 selected communities will then begin to build and execute plans in 2020 and 2021 to become a Strong Start Community, signaling a genuine commitment to giving Hoosier children the best start possible in their elementary education journey and paving the way for future success.