



Growing the Heart of the Commonwealth: Early Alignment for Children's Lifelong Success

Worcester's Birth-3rd Grade Strategic Framework

MARCH 2016

Acknowledgements

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Worcester's Birth to 3rd Grade Alignment Partnership Council

Edward Street Child Services

Worcester Public Schools

Worcester Child Development Head Start

Quinsigamond Community College

Family Services of Central MA

Worcester Family Partnership

YWCA of Central MA

Worcester Comprehensive Education & Care

Guild of St. Agnes

Rainbow Child Development Center

Webster Square Day Care Center

Worcester Public Library

Worcester Education Collaborative

Latino Education Institute

Pernet Family Health Services

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Introduction

Worcester is poised to take bold action on one of the most strategic and important investments we can make in our **children**, our City, our economy and our future. **Early learning** is a smart investment. The strategic directions and strategies in this framework will provide solutions to some of the most significant problems facing our City by investing in early and equal development of human potential.

We hold the triple distinctions of being the 2nd largest city in New England, a leading Gateway City, and the leading resettlement community welcoming 300-500 new families each year, all of which drive our unique, richly diverse City. To be a truly great city, Worcester must have healthy children, engaged families and the very highest standards in our early learning system. Our City is fortunate today to have so many people and organizations committing time and resources to improve the education and health of our children and to support families as their children's first teacher.

Early Alignment for Lifelong Success, Worcester's Birth to 3rd Grade Strategic Framework represents a unique model of collaboration that aligns the resources of health, early learning and family engagement thereby aligning all of the City's resources toward common goals. It plays a vital role in our City's efforts to ensure that all children are successful.

Our collaboration offers the City the following advantages:

- ❖ **Greater returns on investment.** By working together toward common goals, resources are leveraged, duplication avoided, and efficiency is greatly increased.
- ❖ **Higher quality services.** Utilizing expertise from multiple organizations alongside research-based practices guarantees a broader perspective and wiser approach.
- ❖ **Enhanced capacity.** Very few organizations have the capacity to create community-wide impact. A collective effort enhances the impact of each organization, while generating a much larger impact overall.

Our proposed framework is intended to create a comprehensive citywide **system** of care, education, supports and services that recognizes a child's success in school and life is strongly influenced by foundations that begin at birth through third grade. These are the formative years that shape a child's growth, development and learning. Each stage of a child's development builds on the platform for success to the next stage.

The framework is based on the premise that efforts to ensure an opportunity for **every** child to succeed in school and life must address the needs of the whole child – i.e. physical and mental health and well-being, as well as intellectual and social-emotional development skills.

The aim of this framework is to provide guidance and direction for priority setting, staffing and budget decisions, and an advocacy agenda and partnership opportunities during the next five years. Specific Action Plans for each strategic area will be built considering connections within the framework and across our community.

Why We Need this Plan

Early learning takes place in many places - home, child care, preschool, and kindergarten through third grade, libraries, faith organizations, parks, play groups and many other community settings. Early learning is also shaped by many people - parents, guardians, grandparents, other relatives, early educators, teachers, health care providers and a variety of caring adults and programs. Similarly, school age programs take place in many community settings and are organized by partners across the city, including schools and community-based programs. This rich variety offers choice for families according to their own values and need. However, when everything takes place in separate silos, families have a hard time finding the services and information they want. Further, while there have been a number of efforts to build bridges between existing programs, the pieces are still disjointed. An early learning system organizes and integrates the various policies, programs and services for young children alongside those for the adults who care for and teach them. When the elements work well and align with each other, children have the best opportunity to reach their full potential.

Our Vision

In Worcester, the community actively collaborates to improve the health, social-emotional, and cognitive outcomes for children based on a foundation of strong, healthy families and a top-notch early learning system preparing children for 3rd grade reading proficiency *and* college, career and life success.

Our framework identifies four interrelated Strategic Areas critical in promoting development of the whole child: **early learning, family engagement and support, behavioral health, and health**. These Strategic Areas are supported by four Absolutes that must permeate all we do: **community engagement, partnerships, workforce development, and aligned resources and**

investments. Together these Strategic Areas and Absolutes form a comprehensive and dynamic early learning system.

Worcester’s Early Learning System



Absolutes

**Community Engagement
Partnerships**

Workforce Development

**Aligned Resources &
Investments**

- ❖ Our community thrives when *all* members are actively engaged.
- ❖ We seek coordination, creativity and new strength through our partnerships.
- ❖ We must build and support a highly-skilled workforce of professionals who care for and teach children birth to 3rd grade with high-quality, cross-sector professional development and compensation parity for all educators.
- ❖ Success is predicated on aligning existing resources *and* strategically inserting new resources towards highest return strategies.

Our Guiding Principles

Our work is anchored by a set of interconnected guiding principles. They represent the high standards we must uphold if we are to honor the children and families we intend to serve with our programs, policies, and investments.

Whole Child

- Take into account all areas of a child's growth and learning.

Child Focused and Family Centered

- Promote meaningful partnerships with parents and families since they are their children's first and most important teacher.

Culturally Relevant

- Be flexible, culturally responsive, and reflect the needs of the community and individual children and families.

Comprehensive, Aligned, High-Quality

- Promote a comprehensive and aligned system of high quality services across the birth through third grade continuum, including a workforce with equitable compensation.

Accessible and Accountable

- Be accessible to all children and families; address the lack of equity of opportunity that many children and families face because of race, ethnicity or family income, especially the preparation gap that stems from a variety of risk factors.

Strengths Based

- Build on strengths of children, families, early educators, community stakeholders, leadership and prior planning efforts.

Data Driven

- Promote accountability in all policies, programs and services.

Connections and Partnerships

- This plan only works if everyone in the community plays a part.

Strategic Areas

Worcester’s four Strategic Areas are inextricably linked. Each encapsulates a core focus necessary to fully support the development of strong, healthy children who are ready for learning and life. Each is guided by a set of core beliefs and is linked to objectives, actions and outcomes that our community has defined as paramount in successfully nurturing children.

Strategic Area: Early Learning

Children are born ready to learn. They construct knowledge based on their own curiosity and are driven by their interests as well as through interactions with adults and other children. Each child has a unique learning style which is influenced by his or her experiences, strengths and interests.

We believe that children learn best when exposed to and engaged in high quality environments, interactions and relationships. Children learn through play, self-directed as well as meaningful, intentionally planned experiences in a typical sequence of awareness, exploration, inquiry and application.

Strategic Direction: Increase access to and quality of education and comprehensive services across the Birth to 3 rd Grade continuum so children meet developmental milestones necessary for Kindergarten readiness and continued success.	
Strategic Objectives	Strategic Actions
<p>EXPAND QUALITY PROGRAMMING: Work across Worcester’s mixed delivery system to expand access to home visiting and high quality Pre-Kindergarten, and maintain full day Kindergarten.</p> <p>Prevent summer learning loss.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop specific plan to expand preschool opportunities for all four-year olds within 3 years. ■ Identify funding opportunities to expand home visiting slots over 3 years. ■ Advocate and ensure funding is maintained for full day Kindergarten. ■ Align and promote high quality summer enrichment and learning programs towards the maintenance and growth of cognitive and social skills.
<p>ALIGN STANDARDS AND SYSTEMS: Collaboratively develop and implement aligned learning standards, assessment tools, and data systems</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Identify the following components of quality improvements for all Birth – 3rd Grade programs: standards, curriculum, assessment, instruction, learning environments, and leadership. ■ Collaborate with community and school stakeholders to advance <i>Worcester’s Characteristics of Kindergarten Readiness</i> definition.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure the Birth – 3rd Grade educators have the data management tools, support, and expertise to analyze and effectively use data to continuously improve teaching and learning.
<p>CONTINUITY OF CARE: Increase availability of and access to cross-sector professional development opportunities (including coaching and professional learning communities) and a stable high-quality workforce with adequate compensation for Worcester’s Birth to 3rd Grade workforce.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Deliver high leverage professional development for teachers and caregivers based on needs assessment data. ■ Conduct outreach to family, friends and neighbor caregivers and provide information on how they can promote learning and development of young children in their care. ■ Develop and implement a citywide transition plan to ensure seamless transitions for children and families along the early learning continuum, particularly for all rising Kindergarteners.
<p>EQUIP PROGRAM LEADERS: Increase the capacity of program and school leaders to support teachers in providing high-quality, evidence informed and inclusive early learning supports and environments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop training/coaching opportunities for leaders to expand knowledge and practice of early childhood development and developmentally appropriate curriculum, environments, and assessment.
<p>VIEW CULTURE AS A COMMUNITY ASSET: Support children in retaining their home language and culture while becoming proficient in English.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strengthen the culture competence of educators and leaders across our City.
<p>OUTCOMES</p> <p>Increased access to high quality early learning programs and comprehensive services, especially for children with high needs; increased use of evidence-informed instructional practices; increased use of data for quality improvement and decision making; and increased academic achievement and reduction in the achievement gap.</p>	

Strategic Area: Family Engagement & Support

The family is where children gain their first experiences in life and is the most prominent and continuing influence in their child’s life. Families desire the best for their children and our partnership with families begins there.

We believe that all children and their families, regardless of their ethnic origins, value system, faiths, abilities, customs, language, and compositions must be equally respected and deserving of the opportunity to thrive and succeed thereby ensuring the cultural and economic viability of our community. Children learn best through everyday activities with nurturing people in familiar contexts and when the adults in their lives work in partnership.

Strategic Direction: Encourage opportunities for families to engage actively and meaningfully in their children’s healthy development and education.

Strategic Objectives	Strategic Actions
Promote culturally sensitive, strengths-based orientation to working with families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strengthen coordinated efforts of public and private entities to use culturally competent strategies to engage families. ■ Build relationships and trust among families, providers and schools along the B-3rd Grade continuum
Encourage family participation in decision making regarding their children’s education and care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop citywide philosophy of family engagement with an orientation to building “learning partnerships”.
Increase opportunities for families to engage in parenting education activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide tools and information to families to strengthen their own engagement and involvement in their children’s lives.
Support family capacity with access to information and resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure program staff and educators have the tools and professional development needed to support families with young children. ■ Routinely assess whether information is geographically and socioeconomically distributes to all families residing in our City.

OUTCOMES

Increased cultural and linguistic competence; increased family education and supports; and increased family engagement in decision making and advocacy.

Strategic Area: Behavioral Health

Health of mind and spirit are central to growth, development and learning in children. Children and the adults in their lives all need supports to build resilience and perseverance as they encounter milestones, changing family and societal dynamics, and stress factors.

We believe that children develop the capacity to reach their full potential when they are in secure, trusting relationships with adults that provide safe, nurturing environments. Social and emotional learning is critical to every child’s ability to self-regulate, to identify their own feelings, to cultivate flexibility in thinking and to interact successfully with others.

Strategic Direction: Ensure access to quality mental and behavioral health services for young children and their families, and support the reduction of toxic stress in children’s learning and living environments.

Strategic Objectives	Strategic Actions
Increase the use of high quality, evidence-based social, emotional and mental health training and support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Identify a core set of practices and strategies to be used by early educators across mixed delivery settings. ■ Provide early learning professionals with effective practices that promote children’s social and emotional development and mental health, with emphasis on trauma-sensitive strategies. ■ Identify assessment tool(s) to support educator’s development of nurturing, secure environments and positive adult-child relationships.
Increase the number of environments that provide mental health consultation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strengthen and expand community-based mental health services. ■ Embed mental health services in programs servicing young children. ■ Ensure coordinated transitions of mental and behavioral services as children grow along the early learning continuum.
Increase knowledge and practice of nurturing behaviors among families and early childhood professionals, including the community’s understanding of trauma-informed strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Promote caregiver’s knowledge of the social, emotional, and mental health milestones of young children. ■ Promote neighborhood model so all adults in the community understand and practice trauma-sensitive strategies in their interactions with children and families.
Provide specialized support for children in challenging family situations, including homelessness, child protective services, foster care, and poverty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide early support for children with learning and behavioral challenges that affect developmentally appropriate growth and well-being.

OUTCOMES

Improvements in emotional well-being (for example, improved relationships with peers and adults); improvements in family life; and improvements for children in schools.



Strategic Area: Health

Healthy and thriving citizens participate fully in our economy and enjoy the community’s resources. Our citizens’ health is supported through an ecosystem of healthy environments, playful spaces to promote active living, preventative and restorative services, and nutrition and food security.

We believe the overall health of a child impacts her growth and development. Children learn best when they have adequate nutrition, access and use of outdoor play spaces and continuity of pediatric health care from birth with a dual focus on prevention and treatment. Pediatricians and their medical support teams serve as the family’s first partners in growth and learning.

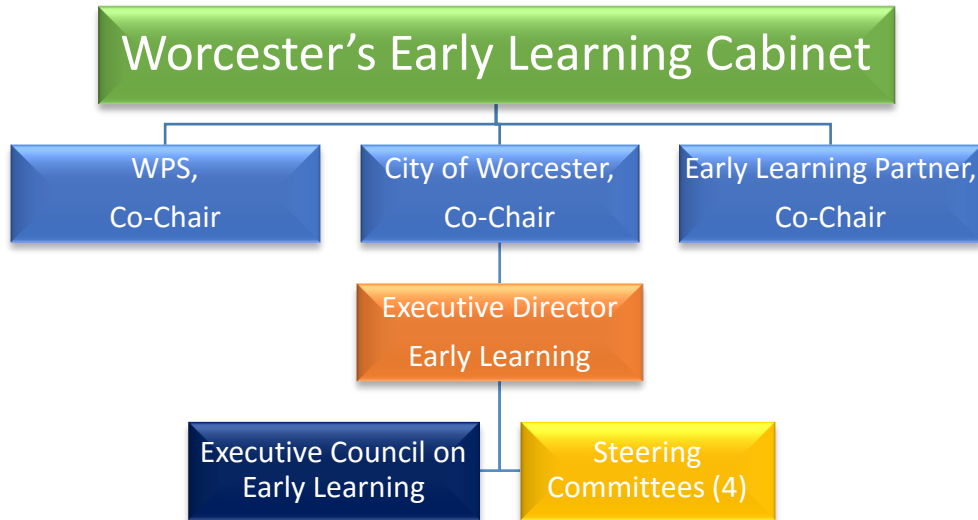
Strategic Direction: Coordinate with healthcare providers and agencies to ensure access to quality healthcare, nutrition services, fitness and playful engagement.	
Strategic Objectives	Strategic Actions
Ensure access to information to increase understanding of healthy development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improve prenatal, infant and toddler, and maternal health through quality prenatal and home visiting services.
Improve the health, nutrition and active living of young children and their families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Promote access to consistent sources of healthy food options for children and families. ■ Leverage existing partnerships to distribute nutrition information and optimize nutrition during pregnancy and early childhood. ■ Continued and expanded investment in shared outdoor spaces for children and families, such as parks, fields and green spaces.
Increase access to preventive oral and medical health care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Seek opportunities to extend embedded health clinics and services into schools, centers and programs serving young children.
Increase number of children who have and use a medical home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Promote and support use of medical, oral, and mental health as well as developmental, vision and hearing screening and services.
OUTCOMES	
Improvements in health of children; increased knowledge of the importance of health and wellness; increased access to healthy food and food security; increased access to facilities and parks for playful exercise and gross motor activity; increased number of healthy homes (lead, asbestos and heavy metal free); and increased coordination of efforts to support health and wellness across the community	

Governance Structure

Ensuring that all of our children succeed takes more than a village – it takes a community with common ownership and responsibility for its children. *Early Alignment for Lifelong Success*, Worcester’s Birth to 3rd Grade Strategic Framework represents a cohesive and comprehensive vision of an early learning system that evolves to support the needs of each child in our community. Much is already underway in terms of initiatives and programs that connect to this vision.

A living frame work requires **leadership**. No one entity can do this alone. Our proposed structure formalizes cross-sector collaboration and decision-making roles across public and private sector partners and strengthens leadership capacity to advance the work. The strategic directions, objectives and strategies outlined in Worcester’s Birth-3rd Strategic Framework are intended to provide the foundation for a more comprehensive strategic Plan that includes a budget, targets and benchmarks to drive the work and ensure accountability. Our work next is to fully identify those programs and resources, examine the gaps, and put forth Action Plans that chart next steps in each strategic area over the next five (5) years.

The new governance structure will provide leadership, management and oversight of Worcester’s Birth to 3rd Grade Framework, Action Plans and Strategies. The governance structure is multi-tiered to ensure all of Worcester’s leaders have a voice in shaping the work. The governance structure is organized under an **Early Learning Cabinet** and contains four tiers: **Co-Chairs, an Executive Director, an Executive Council on Early Learning, and Steering Committees for each Strategic Area**. These tiers will work collaboratively to complete the strategic plan, outline strategic priorities, guide funding decisions, and oversee the implementation of the Plan. Additionally, the Early Learning Cabinet will put in place a process that engages the community, promotes public and private partnerships, and aligns resources and investments that serve children birth through age 8. It will launch an intensive communication plan not only to promote the Plan but to get high level buy-in from Worcester’s citizens.



Co-Chairs will provide leadership to ensure the strategic directions and priorities align with both the early care and education and public school agendas and policies and practices reflect the goals and desired outcomes of both private and public sectors. The proposed co-chairs are the Superintendent/Chief Academic Officer of Worcester Public Schools, a leader from the City of Worcester, and a leader representing Early Learning Providers

Executive Director will manage all aspects of strategic planning and implementation including development of a multi-year plan to accomplish strategic priorities and objectives, support Co-Chairs in leading the plan, share regular progress updates, and ensure accountability. The Executive Director will work closely with the Executive Council to promote community partnerships and widespread community engagement and design a communication plan that is relevant to Worcester's diverse citizens, organizations and businesses.

Executive Council on Early Learning will build local support, raise public awareness and engagement and form strong strategic partnerships. Council members will work together to promote effective policies, practices and services to eliminate resource and service disparities and achieve equal access for young children and families, develop mechanisms for integrating the plan into partner organizations, and engineer a process for funding and sustaining the work. The 12 member Executive Council will be chosen from Worcester's businesses, organizations, foundations, and municipal departments. Membership *may* include the District Attorney, Chief of Police, Cultural Brokers organizations, representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, Health and Medical Institutions, Higher Education, Department of Children and Families, and Together for Kids. At this level of leadership and engagement, membership will include a

financial contribution which would directly support the Executive Director and directed projects.

Steering Committees will be aligned to the four Strategic Areas outlined in the Strategic Framework: **(1) Early Learning, (2) Family Engagement and Support, (3) Behavioral Health, and (4) Health**. Steering Committees will be charged with developing and implementing their respective sections of the framework into a full-fledged 5 Year Action Plan with particular attention to specific outcomes. Steering Committees will be populated with organizational leaders, IHEs, business and health institution representatives and parents and providers from Worcester’s early education centers, family child care systems, early intervention, the Worcester Public Schools (principals, teachers, administration) and Worcester Child Development Head Start. The Executive Director will support the Steering Committees in successful implementation of their respective plans and coordinate and integrate the work of the Steering Committees in alignment with the Executive Council.

Conclusion

Children benefit from a strong foundation of family, community and education. We have one small window in which to get it right. This framework serves as our community’s promise across the earliest and most important years – birth through 3rd grade – when children’s growth and development is like no other time period. Physical, social, emotional, and academic success of all children is dependent on how we – as educators, parents, physicians, leaders, and community members – intentionally and creatively partner to ensure our children’s diverse strengths and needs are nurtured and well supported. Our community’s imperative is to honor young children and their families with an aligned and sustained investment. The future of a thriving and vibrant Heart of the Commonwealth begins when each child grows to her full potential.

For more information and to become involved in Worcester’s Birth to 3rd Grade work, contact Edward Street Child Services at 508.792.0220.