

# Training, Resource, and Advocacy Connector

---

Strategic Plan  
2023-2026





Thank you for your interest in the Regional Training, Resource, & Advocacy Connector (TRAC) – a program of the East Central Indiana Talent Collaborative (ECITC). The ECITC is a collective impact initiative focusing on talent attraction, development, and connection in East Central Indiana (ECI). TRAC is carrying out the goals of the Birth to Five Coalition within the ECITC framework. This regional coalition worked together to identify the key barriers hindering the advancement of the early care and learning (ECL) sector in ECI and developed the framework for the TRAC program. This group was also instrumental in the development of this Strategic Plan.

TRAC's work, as the name implies, focuses on connecting ECL providers to trainings and resources, and empowering them to advocate for the changes that they need to be successful. TRAC can be responsive to local needs and will utilize county coordinators to gauge needs and trends in the region that TRAC can respond to.

Investment in high-quality ECL opportunities is a community and economic development issue. That statement is true for the current and future workforce. Without sufficient high-quality ECL options, communities and its employers today are missing out on potential employees with young children. It will be an issue in the future because today's child is tomorrow's employee.

Did you know that 90% of the brain is developed by the age of 5? An investment in the children of today will pay dividends for the community tomorrow. Utilization of high-quality ECL opportunities is tied to better life outcomes, which means that society and employers benefit as these children grow into adulthood. Research indicates that the return on investment for high-quality ECL can range from 1:4 to 1:16.

While the overarching goal of the TRAC program is to ensure that each child in ECI who needs an ECL seat has access to one, the work is much more complex than just creating spaces. The Birth to Five Coalition found that we must provide low/no-cost training opportunities to professionalize the work that Birth to Five teachers provide. Additionally, we must increase the pipeline and employer partner support in order to ensure that children are receiving great early learning experiences while their parents are at school or work every single day.

TRAC cannot do this work alone – we must bring in employers, funders, decision-makers, and so many others to assist us in solving such a challenging problem with broad community-based impact.

We encourage you to review the following pages to learn more about ECL and the TRAC program's goals for the next three years. If you see a way to contribute to TRAC's success, please connect with the TRAC team to see how we can forge a partnership. If you have an ECL need, please utilize the TRAC team and its many community partners to see if a solution can be found. Whether you're familiar with TRAC or you are discovering it for the first time, we welcome you to engage with us, understand the ECL landscape in ECI, and work with us toward a brighter future for the region.



*Jeri McCorkle*  
**Jeri McCorkle**  
TRAC Program Manager,  
Ball State University



*Ashley Surpas*  
**Ashley Surpas**  
East Central Indiana Talent Collaborative,  
Ball State University



# Table of Contents

Welcome .....	02
Table of Contents .....	03
Our Story .....	04
How TRAC Fits Into the Talent Ecosystem .....	05
Early Care and Learning Matters .....	06
The Big Picture .....	09
The Data .....	10
Our North Star .....	16
Our Strategic Pillars .....	17
Training and Resources .....	19
Advocacy .....	22
Communication and Awareness .....	26
Acknowledgements .....	30



The logo features a stylized, colorful graphic of a person or a group of people in a circle, composed of various colored segments (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple).

# Our Story

In 2017, East Central Indiana (ECI) had a goal of being designated a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Talent Region by the state of Indiana. A formal structure to address talent in the region was developed as part of the application process. This included identifying a backbone organization to move the work forward, establishing a guiding team, identifying core industries, developing four cradle-to-career coalitions, and supporting nine county-level coalitions. The region received the 21st Century Talent Region designation in 2021 and is formally known as the **East Central Indiana Talent Collaborative (ECITC)**. The ECITC initiative is housed in the **Office of Community Engagement at Ball State University**, which serves as the backbone for the ECITC's work.

One of the cradle-to-career coalitions is the regional **Birth to Five Coalition**, created to address early care and learning (ECL) in the region. This coalition, formed with representatives from all nine of the region's counties, was able to mobilize quickly and embrace a regional approach to the work. This group was able to continue looking at the larger goal of providing additional capacity for high-quality ECL experiences within the region. They would discuss issues that could be addressed on a regional level but use their county-level experiences to share best practices and identify opportunities for improving the overall ECL landscape.

The COVID pandemic highlighted the importance of ECL as it is key to a healthy workforce. Society quickly realized that if the ECL providers are not able to provide care for children then there are fewer workers available to our employer partners. Thus, ECL became an economic and workforce development issue.

When employers were struggling to get employees into the workforce because of childcare issues, local economic development groups – including the **East Central Indiana Regional Partnership (ECIRP)**, which consists of economic developers from nine ECI counties – were able to connect to the work underway in the regional Birth to Five Coalition.

Meanwhile, in 2021, the state of Indiana and the **Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC)** announced the **Regional Economic Acceleration & Development Initiative (READI)** initiative that encouraged regions throughout the state to apply for funding for priorities.

ECI's proposal for READI funding was spearheaded by the ECIRP and included a variety of projects throughout the region. One of the truly regional projects was to provide funding to further develop the ECITC.

Grant awards were announced in late 2021 and the ECIRP led the charge on how to allocate the region's \$15 million award to make the greatest impact. The leadership of the ECIRP and its local **READI governing body** allocated \$1.5 million of the award to the ECITC to advance the work of the regional Birth to Five Coalition.

The regional Birth to Five Coalition, which had been doing this work for many years at this point, was well-positioned to make use of the funds and developed a program to address many of the needs identified within the ECI region. That program was the **Regional Training, Resource, and Advocacy Connector (TRAC)** which offers support for existing providers and finds ways to expand the capacity of high-quality options in the region.

# How TRAC Fits Into East Central Indiana

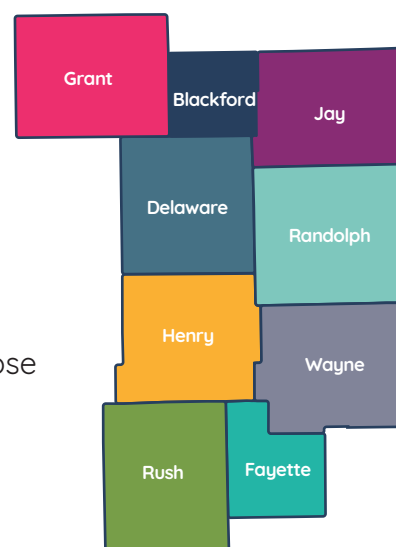
The **East Central Indiana Talent Collaborative (ECITC)** encourages local governments, businesses, educational institutions, nonprofits, and economic and workforce development partners to take a comprehensive, regional approach to creating a better quality of place, developing and skilling up the workforce, and connecting ECI talent with businesses seeking to fill high-demand, high-wage jobs. Regional stakeholders within ECITC selected three high priorities for our region:

- 11%** Boost population trends by 11% resulting in a net 0% population change by 2030.
- 9,000** Mobilize our learning system to increase the educational attainment of 9,000 Hoosiers by 2025.
- 7.5%** Build upon equitable economic opportunities to increase median household income and earnings by 7.5% by 2025.

To achieve these priorities, ECITC outlined five strategies – among those included Equitable Child Development and Education. Birth to five development and support was listed as a key endeavor, and the Regional Birth to Five Coalition was formed to focus on improving access to quality early care and learning (ECL) programs.

The Regional Birth Five Coalition exists to prepare children to be positive contributors in the future by ensuring quality learning opportunities and experiences among early learning professionals, decision-makers, and communities. You can count on us to do that by identifying, bridging, and resolving gaps through education and advocacy - as well as deconstructing a complex regulatory system.

East Central Indiana

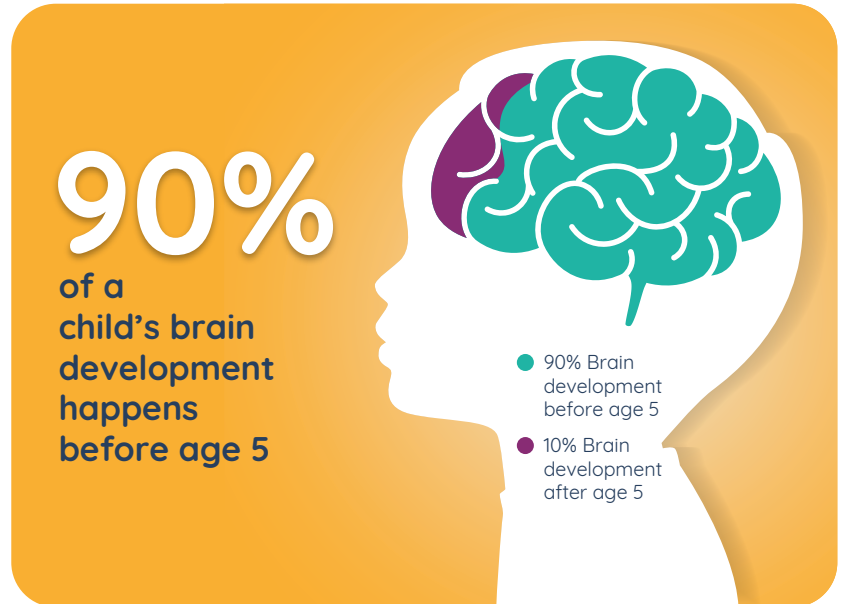


**The Regional Birth to Five Coalition developed the Training, Resource, and Advocacy Connector (TRAC).** TRAC provides training and resources to current ECL providers, encourages individuals to pursue ECL professions, and communicates and advocates the importance of ECL to employers, funders, and state and local decision-makers. By professionalizing the ECL workforce, we will increase this sector's ability to support a thriving workforce throughout all industries in communities.



# Early Care and Learning Matters

The early years in a young Hoosier's life are the most formative time of human development. **Ninety percent of all brain development happens in the first five years.** The foundation for success in adulthood is set from birth to five. It is imperative to our success as a region, a state, and a country that we promote proven models of education that leave the longest-lasting impact on our youngest citizens – and we expand access so that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status – have the ability to attend safe, high-quality early care and learning programs to prepare them for K-12 education and beyond.



Source: Harvard Center for the Developing Child



By investing in early care and learning (ECL), we are investing in the success of families now and in the future. Research shows that children who attend high-quality ECL programs are more likely to graduate from high school, find and retain employment, and earn more throughout their lifetime than peers who do not have access to high-quality ECL programs. This correlates with reduced teen pregnancy rates and overall lower crime rates. Simply put, it serves everyone in the community when we educate children: society becomes more educated, prosperity increases, and instances of antisocial behavior decrease. Educating our children is a powerful investment that enriches the entire community.

# Early Care and Learning *Matters*

In addition to the future gains for our children, access to high-quality ECL causes immediate improvements for their families. Parents can maintain steady employment knowing their children are in safe, stable educational environments during working hours. Parents who were initially unable to enter the workforce due to childcare issues may now participate in the workforce, earning a higher income for the family and even pursue higher education opportunities and/or career advancement. Increases in household income lead to improved outcomes for children. When parents participate more fully in the workforce, families are lifted out of poverty, and communities thrive.

Taxpayers see their investments return to them via reduced need for special education programs and grade repetition, lower healthcare costs and demand on social services, reduced crime rates, and increased tax revenue due to higher productivity and higher wage-earning. According to a Purdue University study on investing in early childhood development, every \$1 invested returns at least \$4 to the community, with some models showing up to a \$16 return on investment.











# The Big Picture

## INDIANA

Existing ECL programs are expensive and not all ranked of a high enough quality to put young Hoosiers on a path to success.

There is not enough capacity to meet demand for early care and learning (ECL) programs in the state as a whole - including East Central Indiana.

Staffing shortages and low wages in childcare make it hard to get - and keep - talented professionals in the workforce.

A disproportionate number of Hoosier mothers (and guardians) are forced to exit the workforce in order to provide care for their children.

The estimated annual impact of this ECL crisis for the state of Indiana is

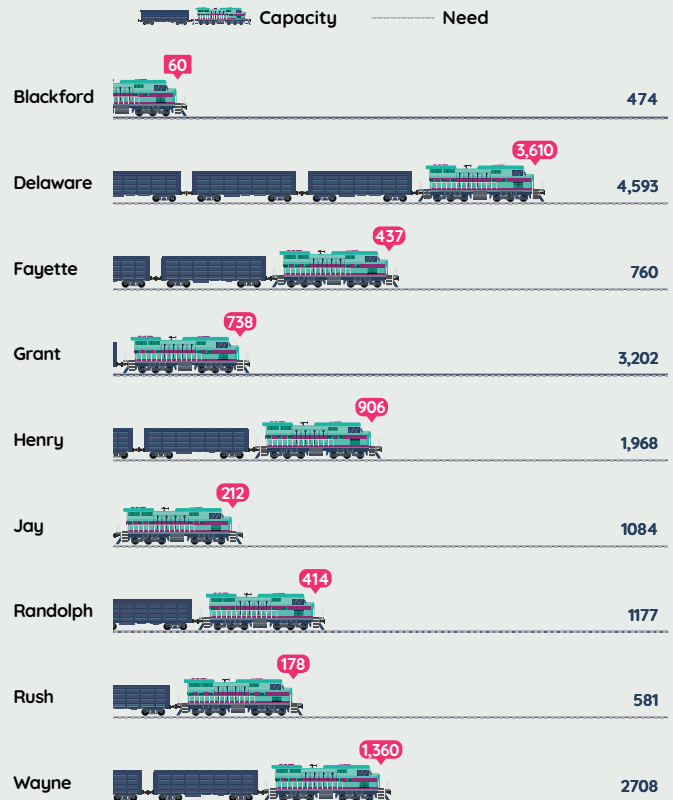
**\$2.2 billion.**

## NEED VERSUS CAPACITY

According to Brighter Futures, there are more than 24,000 children ages 0-5 in the region. Of those, more than 16,500 are in need of care (meaning all adults in the home are working) and there is capacity for only 49% of those children.



### NEED VS. CAPACITY (County)



### NEED VS. CAPACITY (Region)



### NEED VS. CAPACITY (State)



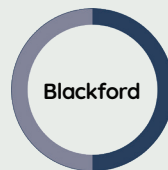
Source: Brighter Futures

## QUALITY OF PROGRAMS

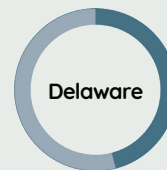
Beyond simply knowing that child care - any child care - is available, it is in the best interests of the entire community that the available child care is rated to be of the highest quality. Brighter Futures' data indicates that all ECI counties could use assistance in improving their percentage of high quality programs available as rated by the Paths to QUALITY™ system.



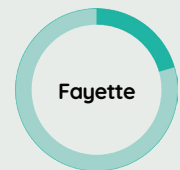
### HIGH QUALITY PROGRAMS VS. TOTAL PROGRAMS (County)



● High Quality: 3  
● Total: 6



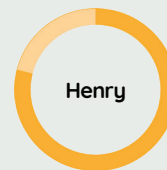
● High Quality: 31  
● Total: 76



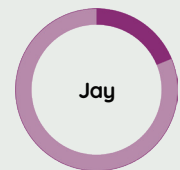
● High Quality: 2  
● Total: 10



● High Quality: 21  
● Total: 33



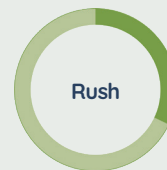
● High Quality: 17  
● Total: 22



● High Quality: 2  
● Total: 11



● High Quality: 3  
● Total: 7



● High Quality: 3  
● Total: 9



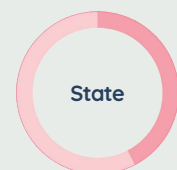
● High Quality: 14  
● Total: 35

### HIGH QUALITY PROGRAMS VS. TOTAL PROGRAMS (Region)



● High Quality: 96  
● Total: 209

### HIGH QUALITY PROGRAMS VS. TOTAL PROGRAMS (State)



● High Quality: 1,789  
● Total: 4,197

Source: Brighter Futures  
HQ is defined as PTQ 3 or 4



## STAFFING SHORTAGES

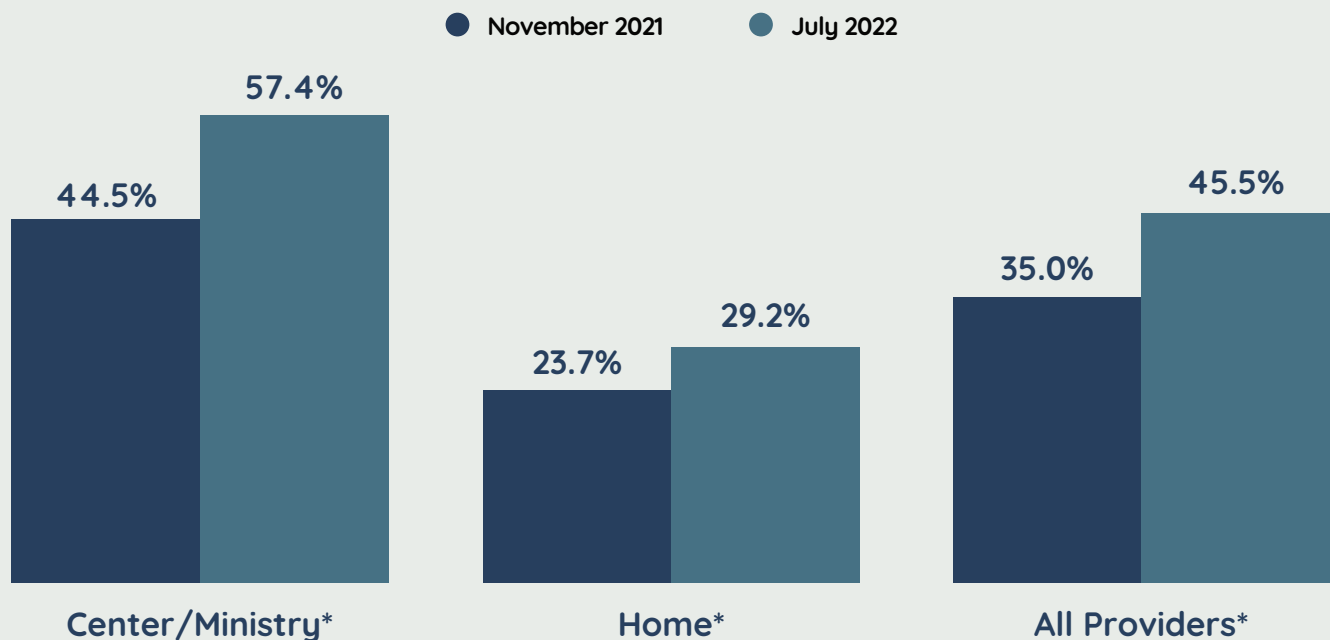
Developing quality programs requires well-paid, educated staff. In almost every region in the state, employment growth for child care workers has outpaced all jobs in total. **60% of centers now report operating at decreased capacity** (about 30 seats per provider as of July 2022) and most report that they have open positions.

Right now, child care workers' wages fall in the lower 2nd percentile of all wages. In ECI, this means the median wage was around \$12.09/hr in 2022. This is not sustainable to maintain capacity let alone grow capacity.

Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment



## % OF INDIANA PROVIDERS OPERATING AT DECREASED CAPACITY DUE TO STAFFING SHORTAGES



\*Difference between 2021 and 2022 is significant at a 95% confidence interval. Note: survey responses limited to providers at PTQ levels 3 and 4

Source: IBRC for Early Learning Indiana

## COST OF CARE

Child care is considered affordable if it costs a household **no more than 7% of their income**. None of the nine counties in ECI have what would be considered affordable child care. Even families with one child in ECI are paying well above the 7% mark. This increases sharply for families with multiple young children. Indiana is one of 33 states where infant care is more expensive than college. In fact, 9.3% of all families (2020-2021) with children younger than age 6 in Indiana reported problems with child care severe enough to have caused someone in the family to quit a job, not take a job, or greatly change their job in the past year.

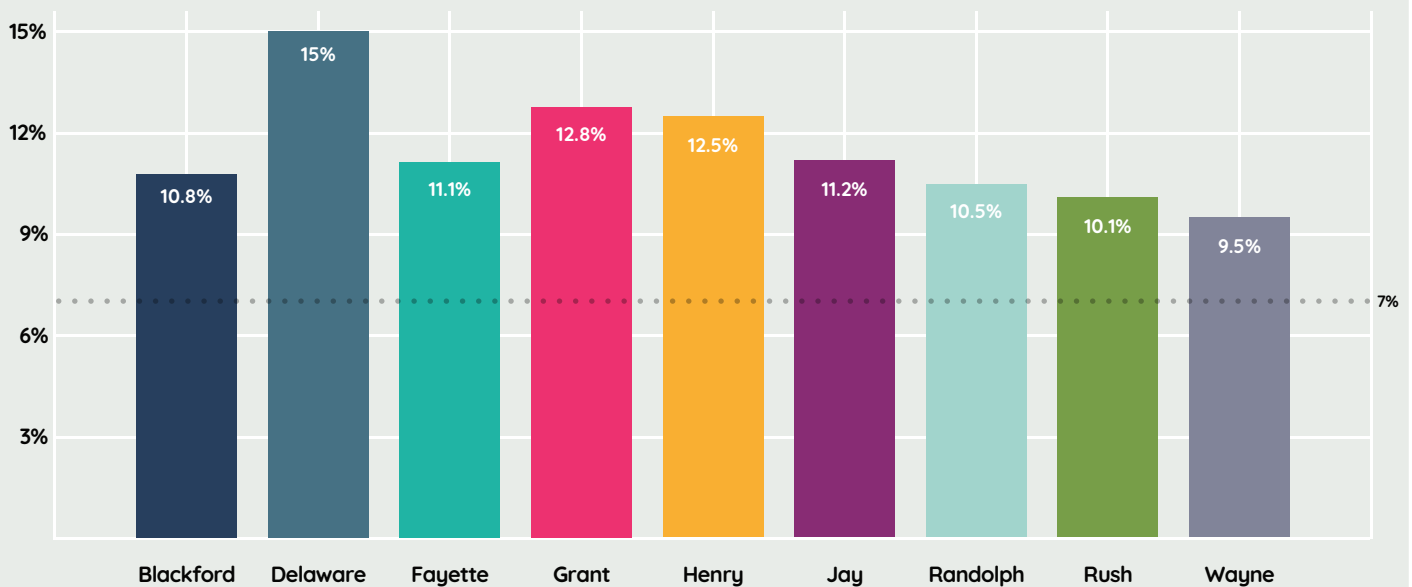
Source: IYI Data Book, 2023



## CHILD CARE COST-TO-INCOME RATIO

Child care is considered affordable if it costs households no more than 7% of their income.

Source: Department of Health and Human Services



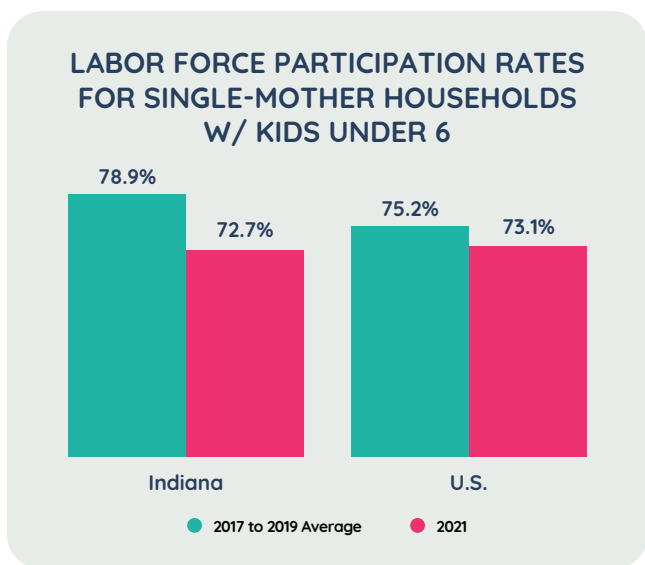
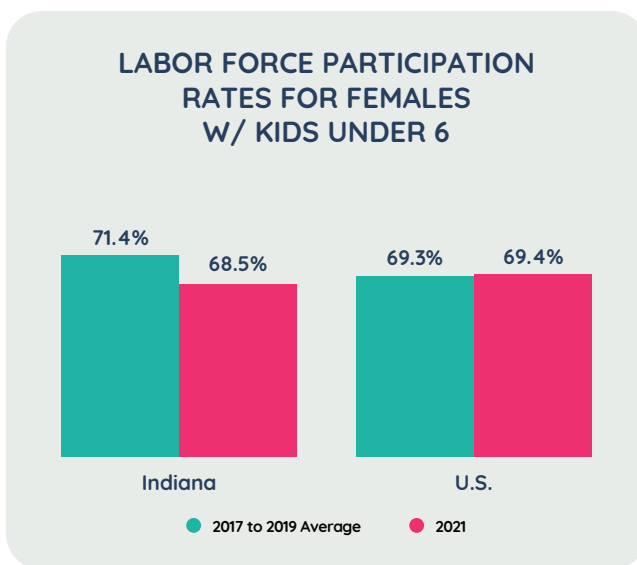
\*7% - where cost should be to be considered affordable

Source: Early Learning Indiana Closing the Gap Report, 2022

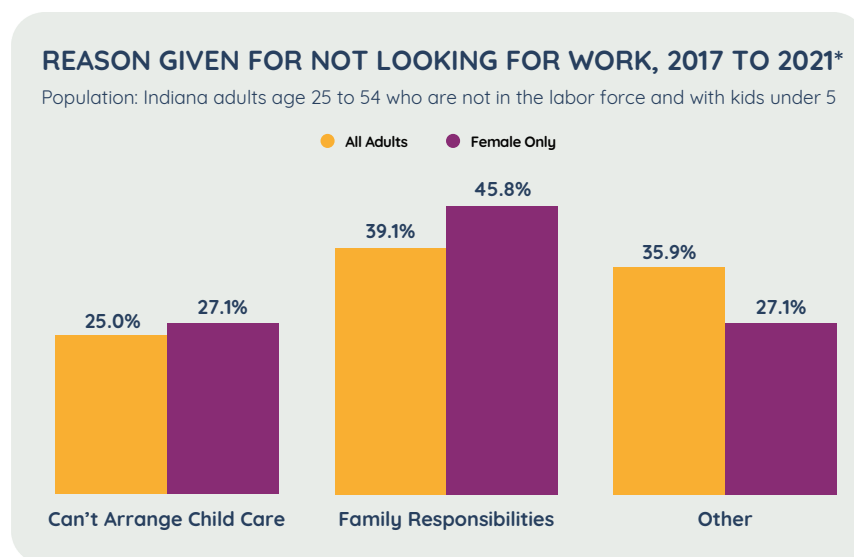
## THE COST TO HOOSIERS

Every year, businesses lose \$1,640 per worker due to a lack of child care options for families. This leads to an estimated annual economic impact of \$2.2 billion dollars for Indiana. Per household, we're seeing far larger declines in labor force participation rates for women with young children compared to the rest of the nation. Nearly 75% of Hoosier mothers of young children who are not in the labor force say that they are not looking for work because they "can't arrange child care" or other "family responsibilities."

Source: Strong Nation



Source: IBRC for Early Learning Indiana



Source: IBRC for Early Learning Indiana



## ON TRAC TO A SOLUTION

The data illustrates a great need among the nine counties that comprise East Central Indiana. Accessible, affordable early care and learning (ECL) programs led by well-staffed, supported, and highly educated professionals would help to resolve a number of problems faced by our region and echoed throughout Indiana and the United States. TRAC's work seeks to resolve the problems faced in this industry of need versus capacity, quality of programs, costs of child care, wages for childcare workers, lagging labor force participation rates for Hoosier mothers, and the overall economic impact due to our current ECL availability. These problems are intricately intertwined and require an approach that addresses each of the issues together.



# Our North Star

Our ambitious journey is leading us to our North Star. It is that one fixed point that keeps us focused and aligned so that our mission stays true, and we get to our destination. We have a lot to do to bring East Central Indiana up to meet (and exceed) state levels of access to early care and learning (ECL) and change the lives and career trajectories of the children served by ECL professionals in our region.

## By 2027, we hope to see

- Improved access to quality early care and learning.
- Kindergarten teachers see better-prepared children upon entry to school.
- Early childhood professionals are valued, compensated professionals.
- Communities value quality education and care of young children and their families.



## OUR NORTH STAR

**We will build a strong foundation that East Central Indiana uses – and Indiana sees as a model – to advance early care and learning, its professional workforce, communities, and economic development.**



Our plan is for TRAC to become a model for Training, Resources, Advocacy, and Communication for families, childcare providers, and policymakers. Through this role as a connector, we will see children in safe, reliable educational programs, parents participating more fully in the workforce, families lifted out of poverty, and children graduating from high school with opportunities available to them in the workforce and higher education in rates that exceed state and national levels.

# Our Strategic Pillars

Setting our sights on the future means outlining our path to success for East Central Indiana. Our Pillars – foundational agreements that support our goals and objectives – will be the themes we use to operate as we keep our eyes on our North Star.

## PILLAR 1: TRAINING AND RESOURCES



Intentionally equipping our early care and learning professionals with the tools, resources, and knowledge needed so that they are well-prepared to provide excellent care and learning experiences for young children provides the East Central Indiana Region with a strong foundation.

## PILLAR 2: ADVOCACY



Advocacy involves actively championing the essential nature of high-quality early care and learning experiences. TRAC will work to influence policies, practices, and public perception to create a more supportive and sustainable work environment for early care and learning professionals.

## PILLAR 3: COMMUNICATION AND AWARENESS



The Communication and Awareness pillar seeks to educate and inform the broader regional community, including families, employers, and the potential workforce about the profound significance of high-quality early care and learning. Additionally, this pillar aims to establish a clear career pathway that empowers individuals to develop into highly skilled professionals.









Intentionally equipping our early care and learning professionals with the tools, resources, and knowledge needed so that they are well-prepared to provide excellent care and learning experiences for young children provides the East Central Indiana Region with a strong foundation.

## GOAL 1

Educate and equip early care and learning (ECL) professionals to succeed in the workforce.

**OBJECTIVES:** We will achieve our Goal 1 by:

- Providing consistent and continual professional development training and education for the region's ECL professionals.
- Regularly updating the professional development offerings based on assessments and feedback to improve effectiveness and address ever-changing regional needs.

## GOAL 2

Ensure ECL professionals have access to state, regional, and local partners, enabling them to provide excellent services to children and families.

**OBJECTIVES:** We will achieve our Goal 2 by:

- Offering access to a comprehensive directory of state and local agencies, enabling them to connect with additional support services.
- Acting as a connector and relationship developer with partner agencies.



**OUTCOMES:** We will know we have achieved our goals when we see:

- East Central Indiana ECL professionals are skilled in developing our region's youngest residents.
- Existing professionals feel supported and have access to additional resources.



**METRICS:**

- Number of professionals that have enrolled in professional development opportunities.
- Increased number of providers entering and moving through licensing and the Paths To QUALITY™ continuum.



***Children are our most valuable resource.***

— Herbert Hoover, 31<sup>st</sup> President of the United States of America









Advocacy involves actively championing the essential nature of high-quality early care and learning (ECL) experiences. TRAC will work to influence policies, practices, and public perception to create a more supportive and sustainable work environment for ECL professionals.

## GOAL 1

Change the perception of working with young children from “just babysitting” to a valued profession essential to an educated, well-functioning society.

**OBJECTIVES:** We will achieve our Goal 1 by:

- Creating a Professionalization and Value Campaign for ECL professionals.
- Educating all sectors of the public about the critical brain development that occurs in the first five years and the necessity of setting young children up for success in school and life.

## GOAL 2

Promote ongoing investments in ECL professionals to stabilize the workforce.

**OBJECTIVES:** We will achieve our Goal 2 by:

- Advocating to increase the average wage of ECL professionals.
- Connecting ECL professionals to the resources that would allow them to increase effective business practices, quality services and robust compensation plans.
- Researching and sharing effective policy, practices, and models to a variety of stakeholders.





## GOAL 3

Engage East Central Indiana employers to participate in ECL solutions.

**OBJECTIVES:** We will achieve our Goal 3 by:

- Host regular employer forums and roundtables to hear the needs of employers and their employees to learn how we can partner to improve the ECL needs of their employees.
- Promote the connection between investing in ECL programs and employee attendance, performance, and stability.

## GOAL 4

Cast a vision for the future of ECL in the region.

**OBJECTIVES:** We will achieve our Goal 4 by:

- Increase ECL collaboration and quality through participation in local and regional trainings.
- Demonstrate regional commitment to continue to learn and grow as outspoken professional leaders of our Regional Birth-5 coalition.





**OUTCOMES:** We will know we have achieved this goal when we see:

- Greater workforce entry and less workforce exit of ECL professionals.
- Reduced discrepancy between the lowest wage profession versus the highest importance span in life.



**METRICS:**

- Number of childcare spaces and capacity within licensed, high-quality ECL facilities.
- Number of employers who offer childcare supports for their employees.
- Increase applicants, recruitment and retention of ECL professionals.









The Communication and Awareness pillar seeks to educate and inform the broader regional community, including families, employers, and the potential workforce about the profound significance of high-quality early care and learning (ECL). Additionally, this pillar aims to establish a clear career pathway that empowers individuals to develop into highly skilled professionals in ECL.

## GOAL 1

Educate regional community members (families, employers, greater public, and others) about the importance of high-quality ECL.

**OBJECTIVES:** We will achieve our Goal 1 by:

- Using various channels, communicate the importance of robust ECL environments.
- Providing stakeholders with ready-to-use materials to further educate the community.

## GOAL 2

Develop a career pathway to highlight opportunities in the ECL professional workforce.

**OBJECTIVES:** We will achieve our Goal 2 by:

- Developing and sharing a visual representation of the ECL career pathway for each county and the region.
- Being visible in the community, TRAC will be engaged with stakeholders, local high schools, educational partners, and workforce development organizations.



## GOAL 3

Change current providers' internal perception of the professionalism of ECL.

**OBJECTIVES:** We will achieve our Goal 3 by:

- Removing barriers for current and future ECL providers to earn their Child Development Associates and other advanced certifications.
- Hosting special appreciation events for ECL professionals.





**OUTCOMES:** We will know we have achieved this goal when we see:

- Testimonials from parents or businesses.
- ECL professionals better understand the depth of their role and its foundational relationship to lifelong success.
- ECL providers gain confidence to view and present themselves as professionals.
- Community members gain respect and understanding of ECL professionals.
- Through partnerships with schools, increase knowledge of career pathways for ECL as a profession.
- Link various audiences to resources available for ECL professionals.



**METRICS:**

- Increased number of ECL professionals earning advanced certifications (CDA, Associates, Bachelor's, or Master's) in early childhood education or a related field.
- Increased number of childcare facilities across the region achieving licensing and other voluntary safety and quality certifications.
- Increased number of recruiting opportunities for potential ECL professionals.



*Listen to the children, learn about them, learn from them. Think of the children first.*

— Fred Rogers














# Acknowledgements

## *Thank You to Our Contributors*

This team has been continually working to advance the quality of early care and learning professionals since 2018. Each and every member has been committed to the ongoing success of TRAC. Thank you for your kindness, your reasonableness, your strengths, and your expertise. We thank those listed here and the many more individuals and organizations who have contributed to this plan. Thank you all!

★ Champion since the beginning

 County Coordinator

- **Danielle Arthur**   
Oak Park Early Learning Academy
- **Emma Dragoo**  
Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children
- **Brianna Green**   
Muncie BY5
- **Pat Heiny** ★  
Early Childhood Learning Coalition
- **Sara Hoover**  
The Child Care Resource Network CCR&R
- **Jennifer Lee** ★  
Chances and Services for Youth CCR&R
- **Theresa Lindsey**  
Economic Development Corporation of Wayne County, IN
- **Arika Marlatt**   
First5 Early Learning Coalition
- **Jeri McCorkle** ★  
TRAC, Ball State University
- **Natalie McIntire** ★   
Helen Lieber Early Learning Academy
- **Missy Modesitt** ★  
Muncie BY5
- **Liane Nickey** ★   
Henry County Child Care Network
- **Haylie Reese** ★  
Family and Social Services Administration
- **EVaughna Shepherd**   
Randolph County United
- **Ashley Shirley** ★  
Thriving Grant County, Thriving Mill Township
- **Acacia St. John** ★  
Forward Wayne County
- **Lucinda Stipp**  
TRAC, Ball State University
- **Ashley Surpas** ★  
East Central IN Talent Collaborative, Ball State University
- **Dani Svantner** ★   
Westminster Preschool
- **Wendy Turcott**   
Westminster Preschool
- **Billie Watkins**   
Fayette County Community Foundation
- **Stacy Wheeler** ★  
Classroom Connections of ECI

Thank you to the **Ball State University Office of Community Engagement Team** for their support and to **Stratavize Consulting, Inc.** for assisting us in the development of the TRAC program.





**Jeri McCorkle**

jeri.mccorkle@bsu.edu  
765.748.4810

TRAC Program Manager,  
Ball State University

**Lucinda Stipp**

lastipp@bsu.edu  
765.730.7515

TRAC Program Coordinator,  
Ball State University

**Ashley Surpas**

ashley.surpas@bsu.edu  
765.228.2340

East Central Indiana Talent  
Collaborative, Ball State University



