



From Idea to Impact

Building Strong Brains in Elkhart County, Indiana

Lead Partners: Child and Parent Services, Community Foundation of Elkhart County, Crossroads United Way, Horizon Education Alliance, The Source, Tamarack Institute

The Big Idea

Investing in children and families resonates with many community leaders in Elkhart County. Over the last 20 years, the Community Foundation of Elkhart County, Horizon Education Alliance (HEA Indiana), Crossroads United Way, The Source, Child and Parent Services (CAPS), and community organizations had made significant investments. And yet, the data showed that over 50% of children entering kindergarten were not ready to learn.

The Compelling Question:

Why, despite our best efforts in Elkhart County, are only 40 – 45% of children entering kindergarten ready to learn?

These children did not have the social or emotional skills needed to engage with their peers and teachers. Something needed to be done. Several organizations began discussing how they might change this. They knew that good work was happening in Elkhart County, but the early learning system needed focus, support, and investment.

In September 2021, eleven community leaders representing five partner organizations formed a Design Team and began a collective journey to answer a vexing question: *why, despite our best efforts in Elkhart County, are only 40 – 45% of children entering kindergarten ready to learn?*

The Progress Made Together

Progress to influence and change systems is often a journey of small steps and large leaps. The Kindergarten Readiness Design Team met monthly with the objective of stewarding the collective systems change work forward. Over the first fourteen months, there have been multiple phases to the work and considerable progress.

- **Designing a ‘good enough’ theory of change** – The first task for the Design Team was to develop a ‘good enough’ theory of change. A theory of change presents a shared future vision for the community. The Elkhart County kindergarten readiness theory of change identified the challenges faced by parents and practitioners.
- **Learning from parents and caregivers across Elkhart County** – Once the Design Team confirmed the ‘good enough’ vision, they identified the need to test this vision for change with parents, caregivers, and early learning professionals. Over four months, eight parent listening sessions were held across Elkhart County. The message was clear: parents and caregivers want the very best for their children but often don’t have the resources or know where to turn to get the information and support they require.
- **Walking through the Data** – The next step in the process was to engage early childhood practitioners, educators, and community leaders in identifying systems strategies. Over 70 community leaders participated in Elkhart County’s Early Childhood System data walk experience. Over the course of three hours, participants explored data points, parent and caregiver stories, and worked collaboratively to define three action themes: maternal and child health; quality early learning environments; and family and caregiver support.
- **Moving from Ideas to Strategies for the Early Childhood System in Elkhart County** – Building on the momentum of the Child Dashboard Action Meeting, 31 community volunteers participated on three action teams to identify system level strategies which might shift the early learning and kindergarten readiness outcomes for children across Elkhart County. Through structured facilitated sessions, the community leaders mapped the early childhood system, identified priorities and leverage points.



- **Building Strong Brains - Elkhart County’s Early Childhood Initiative** – In November 2022, the collaborative welcomed over 250 community members to collectively learn about what is needed to build strong brains in Elkhart County. Community-wide engagement, investment and support were key themes emerging from the gathering. Momentum is growing.



It's been exciting to see the progress our community has made in the past year in early childhood.

We know the work ahead will require a decade or more of work, but we're off to a great start with the launch of Building Strong Brains. We couldn't have done this without the wisdom, expertise and coaching from Tamarack Institute and Liz Weaver, and we're excited to continue learning about systems work. They've really helped us be more confident as we've engaged diverse stakeholders.

~ Brian Wiebe, CEO

The Impact – Sharing Results

Influencing a system as complex as an early learning system requires the shared commitment and impact of many individuals and organizations. Over the past 14 months the Building Strong Brains team has learned together, deepened community ties, engaged new partners and put into place the enabling conditions for change to happen.

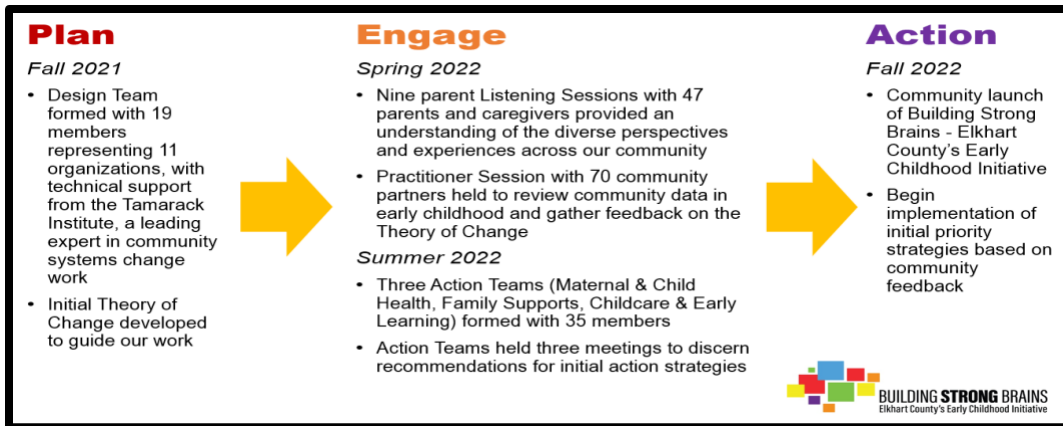
The collaborative is firmly focused at looking for collaborative solutions and actions which will shift the early childhood and learning system. This approach builds upon a strong history of collaboration in Elkhart County and seeks to leverage the skills, interests and passions of individuals and organizations who are leading change every day.

Early-stage collective impact efforts measure progress and impact by assessing the following progress indicators which are described in more detail in the [Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact](#).

Indicator	Impact
Understand the problem from the perspectives of individuals who live with it each day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nine (9) parent listening sessions were held engaging 47 parents and caregivers in English and in Spanish. • One kindergarten teacher listening session was held to gain their perspectives about kindergarten readiness
Co-create solutions that are rooted in lived experience and have the potential for significant uptake	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70 community partners engaged in a data walk session which uncovered shared learning about key data points impacting children and families • 35 community leaders representing cross-sector perspectives co-designed strategic priorities and proposed action solutions
Refine the CI initiative’s evolving goals, strategies, and indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The collaborative began its work by asking a compelling question about kindergarten readiness in Elkhart County • A theory of change was developed and shared with community partners • The three action strategies were further defined by action team • Key social, emotional and community indicators have been identified
Expand the initiative’s reach, by increasing awareness, building the will for action, and improving the adoption of best practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To date more than 350 community members have been engaged in the work • The Building Strong Brains brand has been developed and a communications strategy launched • The Building Strong Brains website was launched in November 2022 • Four articles appeared through local media outlets
Build community capacity to lead and sustain change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five key partners: Community Foundation of Elkhart County, Crossroads United Way, Child and Parent Services, Horizon Education Alliance and The Source are deeply invested in the work • The circle of partners is growing steadily • Seed financial resources have been provided by the key partners • A Director for the Building Strong Brains coalition will be hired in December 2022

The Building Strong Brains initiative was successful in achieving significant results in its early-stage development. A growing network of over 300 community leaders have been engaged through design, steering and action teams, parent listening sessions and community engagement sessions. This input has shaped the theory of change. Five core organizations have invested their human and financial capital to move the initiative forward.

Their solutions have been co-created with community practitioners and cross-sector partners including parents, educators, and business leaders. The system level solutions seek to leverage existing community resources and networks. In 2023, the Building Strong Brains initiative will hire its first Director to move toward concrete actions and community impact.



Tamarack Institute - A Consulting and Learning Partner

The Tamarack Institute has played a pivotal role as a consulting and learning partner with the Building Strong Brains Team in Elkhart County. Specific supports included:

- Facilitating the Theory of Change Conversation leading to a foundational document
- Supporting and facilitating Design and Steering team meetings to keep progress moving forward
- Developing a resource guide to support the Parent Listening sessions
- Providing training to the team about the data walk process
- Designing the workshop designs for the action team sessions and providing training and coaching supports to the action team co-chairs
- Maintaining a system level and collective impact focus by sharing resources, linking to communities doing similar work and providing coaching when required

Tamarack has shared its learning and experience to assist Elkhart County scale a community change initiative focused on Building Strong Brains.

Sharing Lessons Learned

Below are five lessons learned through the first fourteen months of the Building Strong Brains initiative.

1. **A committed team of community partners is essential to drive collective work forward.** The Building Strong Brains team invested their shared knowledge, human and financial resources, community connections and passion for children and families in Elkhart County. The collective effort moved forward quickly because the partners were willing to both roll up their sleeves and also lead.

2. **Understanding the local community context is key.** Communities are complex and dynamic. The Building Strong Brains team has a deep understanding of the community and how to engage a range of partners. They also acknowledged and lifted up the work of previous collaboratives, parents, early learning practitioners and teachers.
3. **Engaging the community in the co-design process builds momentum.** Over fourteen months, the Building Strong Brains team grew from a small collective of eleven people to engaging more than 300 people in the co-design process. This momentum grew by ever increasing circles and by welcoming new ideas and perspectives.
4. **A compelling question is a good place to start.** The initial partners recognized early on that over 50% of children entering kindergarten were not ready to learn. They also recognized the upstream impacts of this on school progress and achievement, graduation, and workforce development. Investing early in children has a significant splash and ripple effect.
5. **Keep focused on the system.** Many communities are like Elkhart County. There is a lot of good work happening. However, there are systemic barriers, including working in silos, not listening to those most impacted, and lack of focus on the bigger picture which prevent impact. The Building Strong Brains initiative understands that programmatic interventions improve the odds for children, but systemic interventions seek to forever change the odds for children and families in Elkhart County. This is their shared vision.

To Learn More:

- Visit the **Building Strong Brains – Elkhart County’s Early Childhood Initiative** [website](#)
- FSG and the Collective Impact Forum – [Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact](#)
- Learn more about the [Tamarack Institute](#)