Early Childhood Issue Brief

Children are born learning, and their experiences in the first years of life form the building blocks for their future success in the classroom, in the workplace, and in the community.

"Healthy development in the early years (particularly birth to three) provides the building blocks for educational achievement, economic productivity, responsible citizenship, lifelong health, strong communities, and successful parenting of the next generation," according to the Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) promotes the significance of the First Thousand Days, referring to the period from pregnancy through a child's second birthday, as a critical time for brain development, healthy growth, and setting the foundation for lifelong health. CFEC is especially interested in supporting the prevention of negative outcomes and ensuring safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children, beginning in their homes from the very beginning.

Early Childhood

The Community Foundation of Elkhart County defines early childhood development and education as spanning a wide range of ages, issues, and settings. We include the prenatal months through 8 years of age/third grade. Topics include social, emotional, & academic learning and factors that ensure that children and their primary caregivers are well-nourished, supported, and free from trauma and toxic stress. Finally, early learning settings include formal & informal environments, and caregivers include families, teachers, friends, health care providers, home visitors, relatives and neighbors, and many others who care for our community's children.

Addressing Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Disparities in Early Childhood

We know that people of color strive to overcome more obstacles to achieving developmental and educational milestones. They face historical inequities, unfair policies and practices, higher levels of stress, and more. Yet, we aspire to do more than close gaps. We truly desire for all children to flourish. We will use disaggregated data to identify systemic barriers to success.

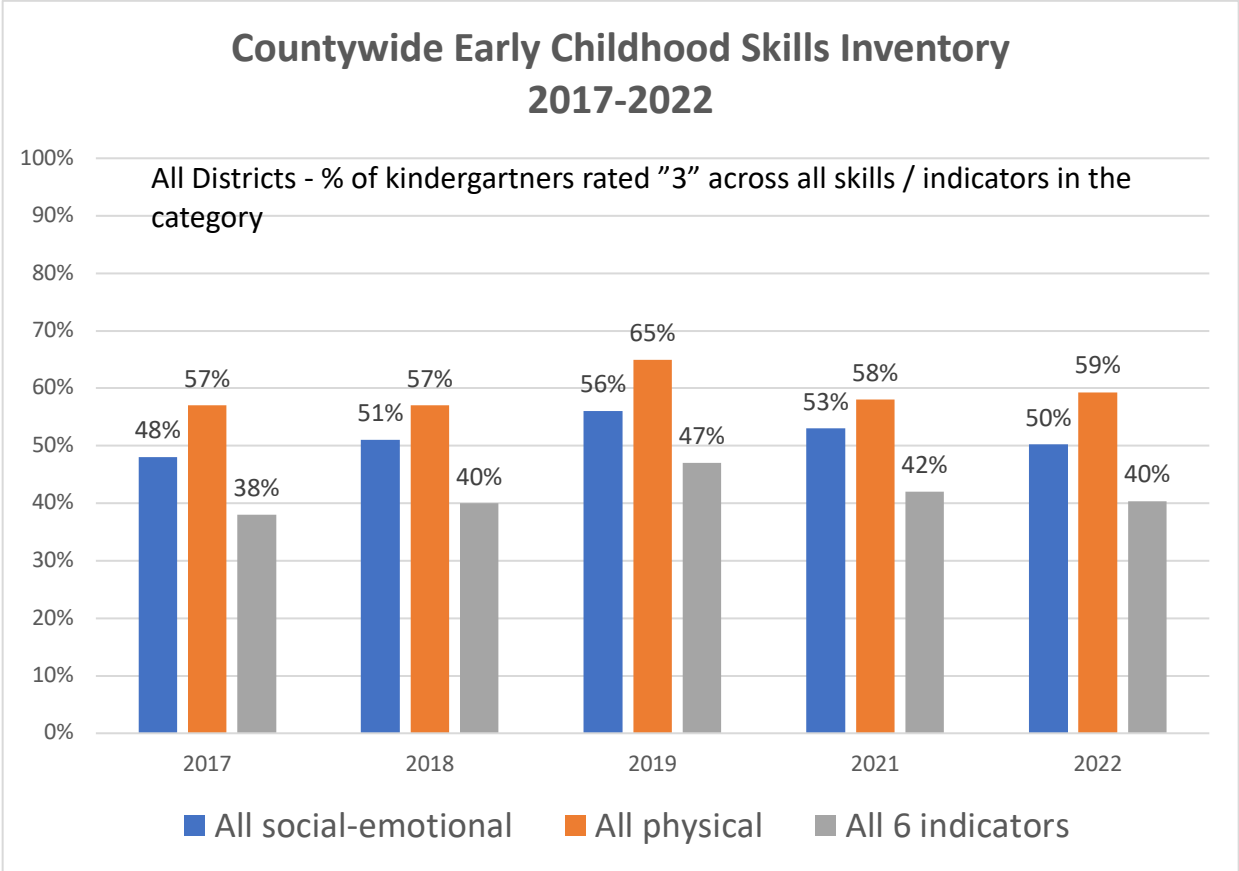## Desired Result: Our Children are Prepared for Success

All Elkhart County children are prepared for success as they begin school and thrive in the early grades.

Foundational Framework: In 2021, the Community Foundation led community stakeholders to develop an approach to improve early childhood outcomes, using the Results Based Accountability (RBA) Framework. RBA is a disciplined way of thinking and acting collectively. It begins with the end result in mind and works backward, step by step, to the strategies.
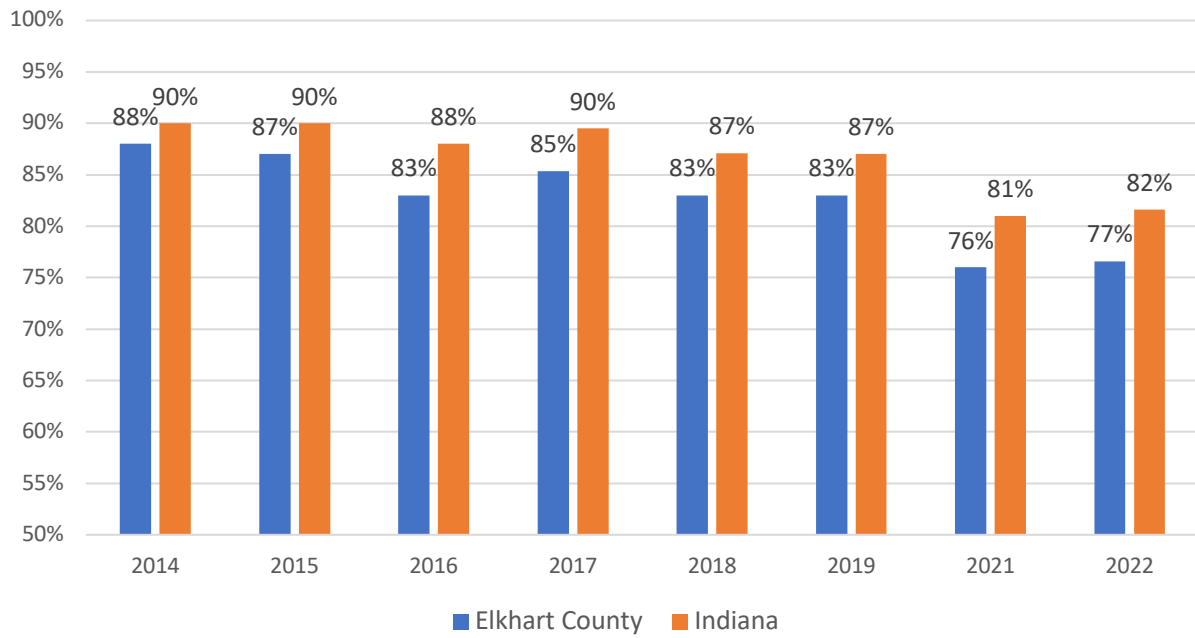
RBA makes an important distinction between population and performance accountability. In population accountability, the entire community, including the public and private sectors, shares responsibility for achieving the desired community conditions. Performance accountability, by comparison, is held at a program, agency, or service level and determines whether the clients or customers of the program or service are better off. This distinction ensures that appropriate responsibility is attached to programs and services and avoids the expectation that one single program can produce significant population-level results.
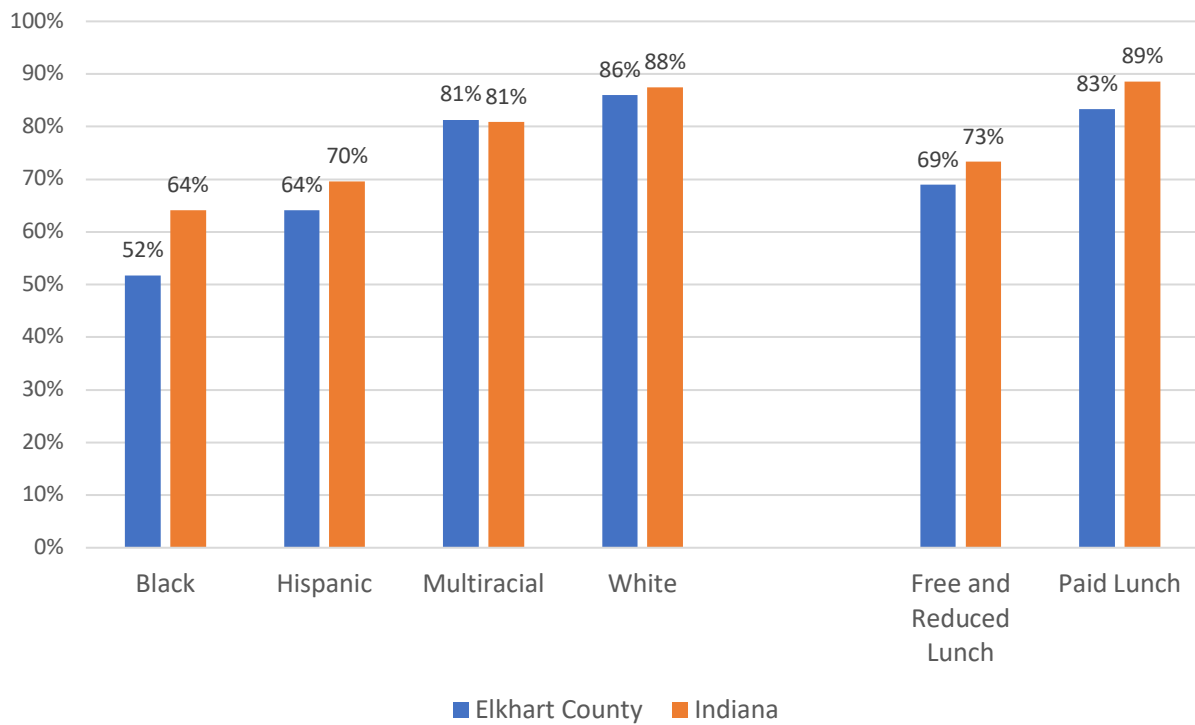
Early Childhood Population-level Measures:
- **Kindergarten readiness** – The Elkhart County Early Skills Inventory, measuring readiness across six developmental domains, was developed by Elkhart County kindergarten teachers and researchers.
- **Third-grade reading scores** – measured through the state IREAD-3 assessment.

Countywide Early Childhood Skills Inventory 2017-2022

All Districts - % of kindergartners rated "3" across all skills / indicators in the category

Year	All social-emotional	All physical	All 6 indicators
2017	48%	57%	38%
2018	51%	57%	40%
2019	56%	65%	47%
2021	53%	58%	42%
2022	50%	59%	40%

Elkhart County I-READ Passing Rate 2014-2022

Year	Elkhart County	Indiana
2014	88%	90%
2015	87%	90%
2016	83%	88%
2017	85%	90%
2018	83%	87%
2019	83%	87%
2021	76%	81%
2022	77%	82%

IREAD Passing Rate 2022 - Disaggregated

Group	Elkhart County	Indiana
Black	52%	64%
Hispanic	64%	70%
Multiracial	81%	81%
White	86%	88%
Free and Reduced Lunch	69%	73%
Paid Lunch	83%	89%

Priorities
While the best available population-level indicators are measured when children enter school, research shows that the most significant returns are realized from investments made at the very beginning of the child's learning – with their family in their home. The Community Foundation will demonstrate the importance of this issue by prioritizing programs and projects that impact perinatal and the very early years of childhood.

Many factors influence the early development of children. These factors include healthy & well-timed births, healthy & safe environments, supported & supportive families, and high-quality childcare options. No single program alone can drive significant change in either of the population-level measures. A collection of targeted interventions, however, **can** lead to meaningful change in a community.

Funded programs will identify how success is defined and measured. The Community Foundation will prioritize funding for projects aligned with the principles outlined by Harvard's Center for the Developing Child (see link below):
1. Support Responsive Relationships
2. Strengthen Core skills (Executive Function and Self-regulation skills)
3. Reduce Sources of Stress

Disaggregated data
The purpose of disaggregated data is to understand gaps in opportunities, experiences, and outcomes within communities to identify systemic issues. Disaggregated data is a tool for communities to understand how the system is currently working and build on community strengths and assets to close gaps. There can be many causes for equity gaps in data, including bias within research tools and data collection methods. Disaggregated data should only be used as a starting point to explore disparities from a systemic and assets-based perspective to avoid perpetuating false stereotypes or narratives about individuals and communities.

Resources

- Harvard University, Center for the Developing Child Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families
    - Support responsive relationships for children and adults.
    - Strengthen core life skills.
    - Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families.
- Success Indicators in Early Learning and Education: https://www.fsg.org/publications/markers-matter
- Indiana's Management Performance Hub. https://www.in.gov/mph/
    - https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/EfC_onepager-a.pdf
- Adverse Childhood Experiences. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html
- Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingACES.pdf
- Tufts University: HOPE-Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences program https://positiveexperience.org/

Graphs provided by Horizon Education Alliance.