

BUILDING BLOCKS

Creating a strong foundation for our youngest children



Celebrating 10⁺ Years

MINNESOTA EARLY CHILDHOOD



INITIATIVE

a campaign for our youngest children

NORTHLAND
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The KIDS PLUS story

The Northland Foundation established its KIDS PLUS Program in 1991 to complement its grantmaking on behalf of children, youth, and families. As the fabric of society changed, more parents worked away from home, and children and youth were on their own when not in school. Many communities did not have programs in place to ensure that young people could connect with caring adults for guidance and support.

KIDS PLUS offered the means to more directly help address this need in northeastern Minnesota. Since then, KIDS PLUS has grown to eight distinct initiatives (and counting) that serve children from birth to young adulthood. An emphasis on broad participation by people of all ages and across different sectors empowers local residents to develop a shared vision for their community – and to take action.

The importance of being community-driven is what led Northland to first develop its acclaimed grassroots organizing model. In 2003, when the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative joined the expanding KIDS PLUS family of programs, this tried-and-tested model provided the framework for building coalitions statewide.

Today, KIDS PLUS is widely recognized for excellence and innovation. Through technical assistance, training and peer learning, as well as funding support, rural communities have impacted thousands of children and young people in positive ways.

At the heart of KIDS PLUS' lasting success is its keen focus on community: leveraging the power of many to nurture the next generations and lead them toward a promising future.

BUILDING BLOCKS



Children are the unique and beautiful building blocks of our future. They are tomorrow's scientists, artists, entrepreneurs, civic leaders, teachers, and parents. They will be charged with caring for the generations to come and providing for the aging generations.

Study after study, research confirms that the early years are critical to healthy development. The brief span from birth to third grade – and the quality of nurturing and learning that occur – lays the foundation for life. Will that foundation be solid so that children reach their full potential? The Northland Foundation, in close collaboration with partners in northeastern Minnesota and beyond, has spent the last 10 years working to make it so.

Bold undertaking

In the early 2000s, Minnesota stakeholders raised growing concerns about the achievement gap. More than half of children entering kindergarten had not reached the learning benchmarks needed for school success, and research showed that students who start behind rarely catch up. More people

recognized what early care and education professionals and parents instinctively knew: the first years are crucial.

In 2003, The McKnight Foundation and the six Minnesota Initiative Foundations (MIFs) joined forces to address this issue at the grassroots level. With startup funding from McKnight, the Northland Foundation and the other five MIFs rolled out the *Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative...A Campaign for Our Youngest Children* to help Greater Minnesota communities focus resources on the needs of children birth to age five.

The MIFs developed 36 Early Childhood Coalitions in Greater Minnesota in the first 3 years. Using the Northland Foundation's KIDS PLUS organizing model as their framework, community coalitions created unique visions and action plans to serve local children and families. They also built a statewide network for information sharing and advocacy.

Impressive progress

Today the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative numbers over 90 coalitions that

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encompass 300 communities. Coalitions are locally driven yet regularly exchange ideas and best practices through regional and statewide networks.

Northeastern Minnesota is home to 12 coalitions: Carlton County, Proctor-Hermantown, Aitkin County, Itasca Area, Koochiching County, Mesabi East School District, Quad Cities Area, Hibbing, Two Harbors, Silver Bay, Cook County, and Ely. The progress they have made is truly impressive. They have rallied diverse sectors within their communities, raised awareness, enhanced knowledge and skills, and implemented hundreds of local and regional projects to benefit young children and families.

Unified purpose

Dedicated individuals, united in a common purpose and supported by significant funding, have gained a great deal of ground in 10 years. Thanks to generous funding partners, the Northland Foundation has raised over \$3.2 million for community-based programming and awarded an additional \$1.4 million in grants to more than 275 early care and education projects.

The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative connects the dots between funders, researchers and practitioners, educators,



child care providers, and other advocates. It delivers a clear message to policy-makers that early care and education must be a public priority. Most importantly, it empowers rural communities to build a more secure foundation for their youngest children.

Forward momentum

The momentum of the early childhood movement in Minnesota continues to grow, with new opportunities to explore and milestones to reach. The Northland Foundation and its partners remain committed to helping ensure that every child has the opportunity for a strong start to a life of learning, achieving, and succeeding.



Funders make it possible

Over the past 10 years, the Northland Foundation has raised over \$3.2 million from local, regional, and statewide partners for community-based programming in northeastern Minnesota. In addition, we have made more than \$1.4 million in grants to support 275 early care and education projects in our region. The incredible community engagement and strides made in early childhood could not have been accomplished without the generous support of our funding partners.

The McKnight Foundation

Mardag Foundation

Bush Foundation

Minnesota Department of Human Services

Essentia Health

The Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation

The Sheltering Arms Foundation

Otto Bremer Foundation

Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi Foundation for Children

Medica Foundation

Blandin Foundation

Miller-Dwan Foundation

Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

Buuck Family Foundation

Delta Dental of Minnesota

Great River Energy

CenturyLink

Minnesota Community Foundation

Individuals, businesses, and civic organizations in this region and beyond have also contributed generously to strengthening the web of support for young children and their families.



Celebrating 10 Years

MINNESOTA EARLY CHILDHOOD



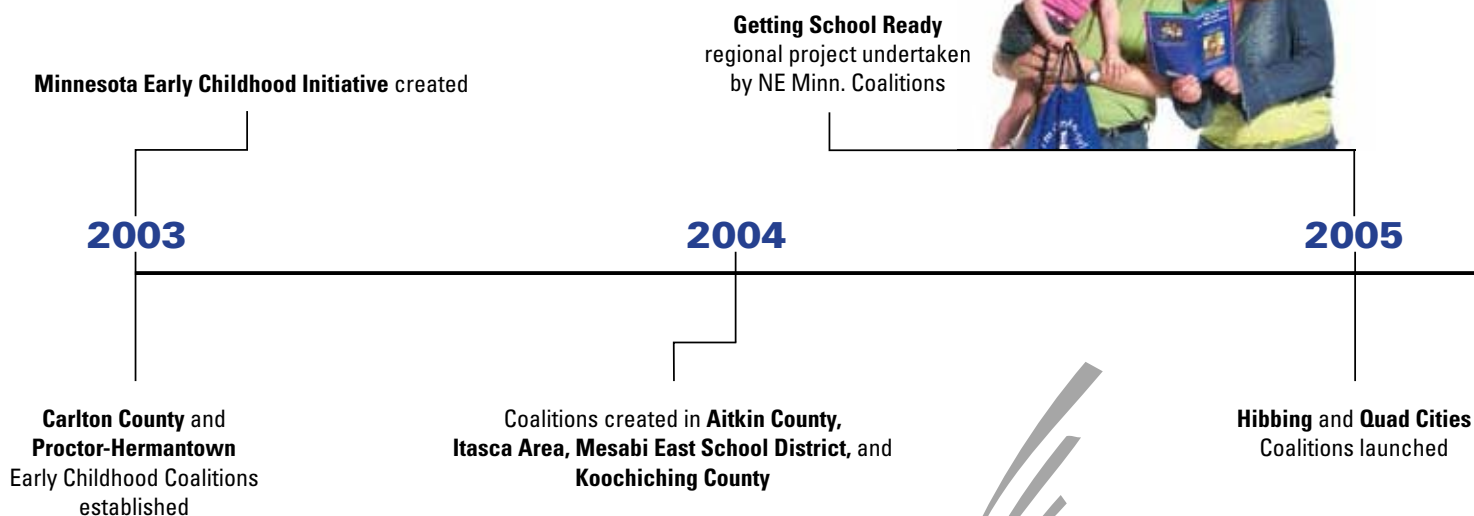
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Pre-kindergarten to Grade 3 Continuum

Young children are constantly taking in new information. Their brains develop at an amazing pace! In recent years, experts have identified preschool through third grade as a critical window of opportunity. Creating high-quality, aligned PreK-Grade 3 learning approaches is a key to improving student outcomes and shrinking the achievement gap.

During the coalition-building process in northeastern Minnesota, the desire to pave a smoother path to kindergarten for children and their families was a recurring theme. The Northland Foundation and the region's coalitions responded by making "ready children, ready families, and ready schools" a top priority.



Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

Through their coalition work, the Minnesota Initiative Foundations heard communities calling out for stronger resources related to early childhood mental health. Education, prevention, and intervention services were sparse in Greater Minnesota, and those that did exist often worked in isolation. Families did not know how or where to get help.

Early childhood mental health is defined as the social and emotional wellbeing of infants, toddlers, preschoolers and their families. Similar to early learning studies, brain science was also finding that our earliest experiences are central to long-term emotional development. Babies and children growing up with the stresses of poverty, abuse, and other

adverse situations are especially vulnerable to problems.

Building on the momentum of the Early Childhood Initiative, the MIFs created a second statewide collaboration, called the Thrive Initiative. Thrive began as a three-year pilot project in 2007. Each MIF formed an Action Team made up of a cross-section of professionals who interact with children.

In northeastern Minnesota, the Duluth-Proctor-Hermantown Thrive team galvanized early care and education, higher education, mental health,



In 2006, Northland presented a regional training focused solely on kindergarten transition to promote awareness and action among schools and communities. It was a watershed moment. Every year since, the Regional Early Childhood Summit has gathered district teams from around the region to work together on kindergarten transition and PreK-Grade 3 alignment.

With the annual Summit and numerous seminars, the Foundation has brought national and international leaders in the child development field to our region to



share cutting-edge information. The results have been positive: stronger family-school-community relationships, cooperation and planning across the PreK-Grade 3 continuum, and new links between early childhood programs and K-12 education.

The Northland Foundation has also granted nearly \$110,000 to support kindergarten transition and PreK-Grade 3 alignment efforts in more than two dozen school districts. Northeastern Minnesota communities are working together, more closely than ever to ensure that all young children enter school better prepared to achieve their full potential in school and in life.

Regional Key Leaders convening on Early Care and Education hosted to inspire education, child care, law enforcement, and business sectors to action

2006

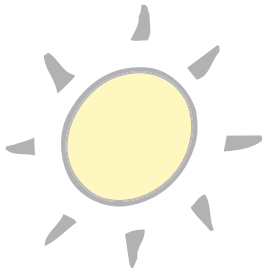
Family, Friend, and Neighbor regional collaboration begun to support non-licensed, informal child care providers to enhance early literacy and school readiness

2007

Two Harbors and Silver Bay Coalitions established

Annual Regional **Early Childhood Summit** launched, with a focus on Kindergarten Transition

Duluth-Proctor-Hermantown Thrive initial meeting held, aligned with statewide **Minnesota Thrive Initiative** pilot program

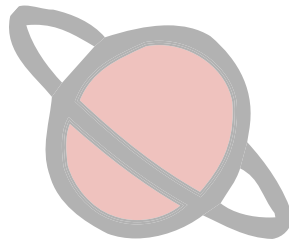


Promoting the Healthy Social and Emotional Development of Our Youngest Children

pediatrics, and other sectors into a unified group. Today, long past the pilot period, they are as energized as ever. A core team meets monthly, continues to develop their knowledge, and initiates collaborative projects to improve the resources available for families.

Their outcomes are both significant and tangible. The Duluth-Proctor-Hermantown team has implemented several model programs. Services are more closely interconnected, with clearer points of entry for families. And professionals who care deeply about young children are merging their expertise and energy – not simply to enhance services but to make lasting systems change.





Supporting Early Care and Education

Children don't grow up by themselves. The adults in their lives help them become curious, secure, little people who feel safe to explore the world around them. During the last decade, Northland has hosted well over 200 trainings and presentations engaging thousands of parents, child care providers, educators, health care professionals, case workers, and others. By bringing experts, from local to national, to our region, rural residents are able to learn firsthand about emerging research and best practices.

In 2006, a "Key Leaders" meeting was organized to share early childhood information with community leaders. This event evolved into the annual Regional Early Childhood Summit. Each spring, the Summit offers a rare, daylong opportunity for school district teams, from



First annual **Child Care Providers' Appreciation & Training** seminar held

Ely and Cook County Early Childhood Coalitions established

Expanding the work of Thrive, **Rural Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative** launched

2008

2009

2010

Reflective Practice and **Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Directory** projects initiated by Duluth-Proctor-Hermantown Thrive

Parent and Community **Toddler Tip Cards** project produced by NE Minn. Coalitions



Family, Friend, and Neighbor extended to more Early Childhood sites, bringing **Play & Learns** to rural communities



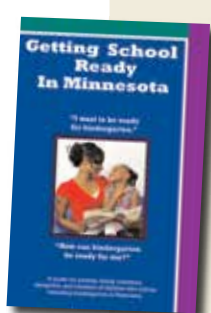
High-Impact Coalition Projects

Over the past decade, the 12 Early Childhood Coalitions of northeastern Minnesota have implemented hundreds of projects and programs tailored to local needs. From instituting Play & Learns and home visiting for informal child care providers, to educating community leaders about developmental milestones, to promoting dental health and nutrition, rural communities have benefited from a vast array of coalition-driven work.

Coalition coordinators and members have rallied their communities around young children and families, and energized and inspired each other through participation in the Regional Learning

Community and the statewide network. As a team, northeastern Minnesota coalitions jointly developed region-wide projects with impact that has rippled across the state.

The School Readiness Project was the coalitions' first major collaboration, and the finished product is still in great demand. Coalition members wanted to do something concrete to increase understanding about what being "kindergarten ready" means – socially, emotionally, and cognitively. With Northland Foundation's support, a parent education pamphlet, aptly titled *Getting School Ready In Minnesota*, was published. This easy-to-read booklet has since been updated,



superintendents to preschool teachers, to focus on early learning topics.

In 2007, with funding from a state grant, attention turned to “informal” caregivers – relatives, friends, and neighbors who regularly care for up to 70% of Minnesota children. The *Northland Alliance for Family, Friend, and Neighbor Child Care* (FFN) forged connections with this difficult-to-reach audience through events and activities to build FFN providers’ understanding of early literacy and development.



A new tradition began in 2008, aimed at the individuals who care for young children so that their parents can work or attend school. The Child Care Providers’ Appreciation & Training Seminar quickly became the largest early childhood event that Northland hosts each year. More than 400 providers convene for a day of education, networking, and fun.

In 2013, Northland launched Parent Aware Pathways to encourage child care providers to participate in the state’s quality rating system.

Training, support, and gratitude for those who raise and guide children are essential Early Childhood Initiative strategies.

Northland Foundation's 
Parent Aware Pathways
 Enhancing the Quality Rating Process for St. Louis County Child Care Providers

Parent Aware Pathways 3-year initiative launched to increase availability of and access to quality rated child care in St. Louis County

Infant and Early Childhood **At-a-glance**
Mental Health Resource Directories created for:
 Duluth-Proctor-Hermantown; North Shore; Aitkin County;
 Carlton County; Itasca County; and N. St. Louis County

2011

2012

2013

Minnesota Thrive Initiative received the **Nancy Latimer Award** from Minnesota Early Childhood Funders Network

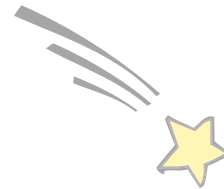
Annual Regional Early Childhood Summit introduces **Pre-kindergarten – Grade 3 Alignment** theme; Kindergarten Transition summary published



AGE to age Reading Pals engaged adults and older adults to support early literacy and reading skills among children age 3 to grade 3

translated into Spanish, reprinted, and spread far and wide. More than 250,000 copies have been distributed in Minnesota, and it has served as a model for other states.

At the same time, the group assembled Getting School Ready backpacks filled with fun learning tools to give to local families. More recently, the northeastern Minnesota Coalitions jointly created “Toddler Tip Cards” promoting easy ways for parents and adults in the community to nurture young children. The coalitions, individually and together, support children and families in meaningful ways.



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The Northland Foundation would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the caring people of northeastern Minnesota who have engaged with the Early Childhood and Thrive Initiatives. Your enthusiasm, dedication, and hard work make our region's communities better places for young children and families.



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