



## More Than a Decade of Making a Difference for Monroe County Youth



Coalition is helping to create a community where children are ready for school and ready for life

In 2007, parents, educators, nonprofits, health professionals and community and business leaders came together to focus on the first five years of life for children in Monroe County.

“We acknowledged we were not going to solve many of the challenges we faced as a community if we did not deal with early learning,” said Tina Peterson, president and CEO of the Community Foundation of Bloomington and Monroe County.

Representatives of the Community Foundation, United Way Monroe County, the Foundation for Monroe County Community Schools, area public school systems and nonprofit organizations organized a coalition to gather input from local stakeholders and study successful models from other communities.

“We began to drive the conversation of what does school readiness look like, and how do we prepare our young people for school and success,” Peterson said.

The coalition determined the community valued early learning but lacked adequate resources to ensure early learning was available and that experiences were high-quality.

This led to the creation of Monroe Smart Start, a leadership initiative funded by the Community Foundation.

One of Monroe Smart Start’s first initiatives was to increase capacity to serve low-income children with free or low-cost child care options.



*“We wanted to allow access to pre-K for families who need it the most.”*

**Jennifer Myers, Coordinator for Monroe Smart Start**

Now, 140 children each year can use Community Foundation grants to access tuition-free pre-K through Title I elementary schools. Monroe Smart Start also provides funding for increased child care capacity at community high-quality early childhood sites.

Another of Monroe Smart Start’s goals is to improve the quality of local early learning by helping early childhood sites achieve and maintain higher levels in Paths to QUALITY.

“We began collaborating with local programs to figure out what they needed to level up on Paths to QUALITY: what were gaps for them, what were barriers for access?” said Myers.

In 2013, Monroe Smart Start began its first Quality Cohort program for early childhood sites actively seeking to progress in Paths to QUALITY. Working closely with statewide and local partners, Monroe Smart Start provides educational funding grants, collaborative opportunities and professional development, including training, mentoring, resources and materials.

“It’s a support system and a network that providers didn’t have before,” Myers said. “Now they have access to hands-on training and learning opportunities; that was a game-changer.”

Since the Quality Cohorts began, 35 licensed early childhood sites have participated and 74% of participant sites have increased one or more levels in Paths to QUALITY. That translates to higher quality care for more than 1,000 children.

A strong partnership with Chances and Services for Youth (CASY) has helped these efforts to support providers succeed..

“We are fortunate to have these resources and partnerships today that did not exist when we first began this work,” Peterson said.

Family engagement and community partnerships have been an essential piece of Monroe Smart Start, as well.

Through its Let’s Read Literacy Program, Monroe Smart Start partners with community organizations to distribute age-appropriate books, literacy guides, developmental resources and child care information to families at wellness exams through age 5.

“When we first started, we needed to build a case in the community of why this matters and why we need support,” said Myers.



Monroe Smart Start planned an early childhood summit and invited local businesses to be part of the conversation. Follow-up luncheons discussed why early childhood mattered for the entire community and the investment it would take from everyone.

“We’ve been incredibly fortunate to have many different organizations at the table supporting this work over the last decade,” Peterson said, naming Cook Medical, IU Health and Smithville Fiber as long-standing champions.

Monroe Smart Start also partners with Monroe County Community School Corporation, the city of Bloomington and Ivy Tech Community College for Indiana's On My Way Pre-K program, which provides 53 weeks of free pre-K to four-year-olds from low-income families.

“It’s been phenomenal to see so many different businesses and organizations come together,” Myers said. “We’ve been able to embrace the spirit of the community and why early learning matters.”