

Worcester Preschool Expansion Strategic Plan

I. Executive Summary

The Worcester Public Schools (WPS) and Preschool Expansion Grant (PEG) planning partners in education and social service sectors across Worcester are pleased to present this PEG Strategic Plan. The plan identifies what would be required in order for the PEG model to be implemented locally to serve children ages 2.9 through kindergarten entry.

Worcester holds the triple distinctions of being the second largest city in New England, a leading Gateway City, and the leading refugee resettlement community welcoming 300 to 500 new families each year, all of which drive our unique, richly diverse city. To be a truly great city, Worcester must have healthy children, engaged families and the very highest standards in our early learning system. Our City is fortunate to have so many people and organizations committing time and resources to improve the education and health of our children and to support families as their children's first teacher.

Worcester's commitment to align resources is part of the fabric of the community. The expansion grant importantly extends upon Worcester's recent Birth to 3rd Grade Framework, which now serves as the City's promise across the earliest and most important years. The framework, called *Birth to 3rd Grade Strategic Framework, Growing the Heart of the Commonwealth: Early Alignment for Children's Lifelong Success* (March 2016), represents a cohesive and comprehensive vision of an early learning system that evolves to support the needs of each child in our community. The strategies in the Framework provide solutions to some of the most significant problems facing Worcester by investing in early and equal development of human potential. Our plan also builds upon Full Day Kindergarten, Educator and Provider Support, CFCE grants, and no less than seven other programs and grants – from Inclusive Preschool Learning Environments to the National Campaign for Grade Level Reading and Worcester's School-Community Data Project.

Whether the focus is on ages 2.9 to kindergarten entry as it is with PEG, or more broadly on birth to 3rd grade, early learning takes place in many settings - home, child care, preschool, libraries, faith organizations, parks, play groups and many other community settings. Early learning is shaped by many people - parents, guardians, grandparents, early educators, teachers, health care providers and a variety of caring adults and programs. This rich variety offers choice for families according to their own values and needs. However, when everything takes place in separate silos, families have a hard time finding the services and information they want. While there have been a number of efforts to build bridges between existing programs, the pieces can be disjointed. PEG will further the City's efforts to integrate the various policies, programs and services for young children with the adults who care for and teach them. When system elements align, children have the best opportunity to reach their full potential.

The Worcester PEG Strategic Plan builds upon a key goal in the Birth to 3rd Alignment Grant to increase access to and quality of education and comprehensive services across the Birth to 3rd Grade continuum so children meet developmental milestones necessary for kindergarten readiness and continued success. As such, the expansion grant will tap into plans already developed by the Birth to 3rd Alignment Team to increase access to

high quality early learning programs and comprehensive services, especially for children with high needs; increase use of evidence-informed instructional practices; increase use of data for quality improvement and decision making; increase academic achievement; and reduce the achievement gap.

The PEG planning process has prompted the Planning Team to focus on needs of children ages 2.9 to kindergarten entry and their families. It required that we continue to identify strengths within the community, resources that can be leveraged, and barriers to achieving a PEG model. Our strategic plan repurposes a building in Worcester to be a central early learning center, to house multiple new preschool classrooms, offer shared professional development (PD) for educators, and comprehensive services for families. The new learning center will serve as a demonstration project for the City, with a dedicated room to expand curriculum and activities for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEAM). The learning center will enable PEG to actualize collaboration at a new, visible level. The plan offers two options to extend transportation to the many families who need it in Worcester. It bridges new immigrant and refugee families into our education system through culturally-supportive playgroups. And it develops a pipeline of leaders. In total, the **Worcester's PEG Plan supports an additional 104 children (80 in classrooms plus 24 in playgroups) and reaches more than 1,000 children already in care at early learning partner sites, as high quality, research-based practices are transferred into existing programs.**

Worcester's PEG Plan supports competitive compensation for educators while increasing access to education attainment. Through a new nexus at Quinsigamond Community College, along with arrangements with Worcester Technical High School, Worcester State University, Becker College and Fitchburg State University, the plan cultivates a pipeline of professional educators to expand the early learning workforce. The Plan offers a unique model where each staff participating in PEG will participate in a specific certificate and degree cohort, and where preschool expansion will be braided with existing early education funding support to advance cohorts moving to the next level of degree attainment.

PEG will provide program wide training and PD, classroom based coaching, and monthly professional learning communities (PLC). Educators and leaders will participate in CLASS observer trainings, with Head Start taking the lead in designing an educator support plan for utilizing CLASS in PEG classrooms. PEG will fund Curriculum Coaches to support curriculum implementation and individual educator development through CLASS. Worcester PEG partners already are at higher levels of QRIS than other cities. All partners will aim for a Level 4 rating or NAEYC accreditation within four years. The plan anchors PEG curriculum and assessment in Worcester's *Characteristics of Kindergarten Readiness; Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten* and will implement the Boston Public School K1 Preschool models as a common curriculum. Our plan explores the portability of the kindergarten screening and registration processes in a central location. PEG will enhance the partner's collaborations with Early Intervention providers, home visiting providers and resettlement agencies under leadership from Worcester Family Partnership and Edward Street Child Services.

Our plan targets hard to reach families, including families who are new to the country and working poor. Funding will be channeled to extend upon the work of the Birth to Grade 3 Strategic Framework already in place and will move toward developing a citywide philosophy of family engagement. PEG will fund Family Engagement Specialists and Family Advocates, and will embed mental health services into new classrooms via Together for Kids and other community based partnerships. Finally, it expands the CFCE pilot with a new playgroup model to support specific cultural groups and recent immigrants and refugees.