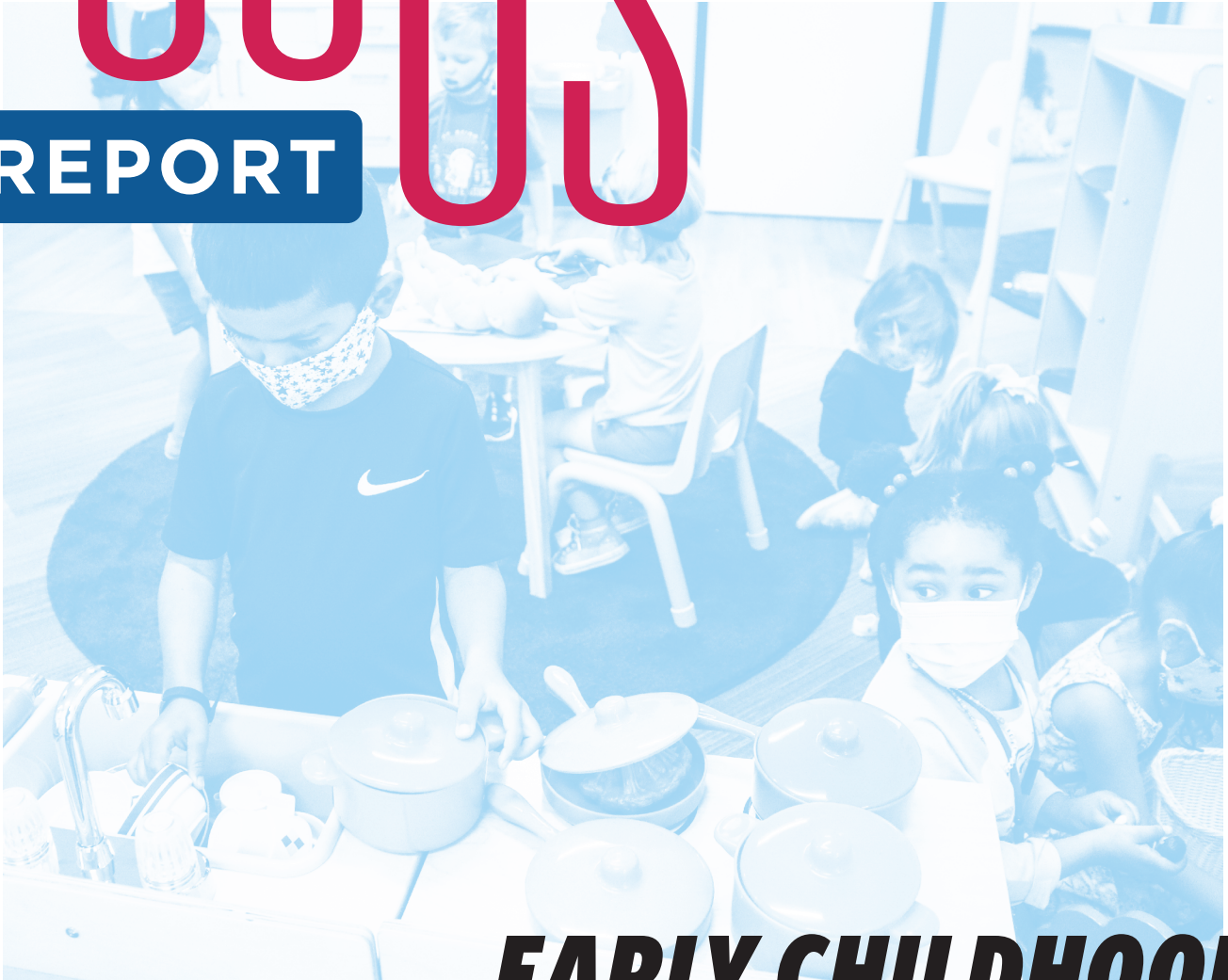


COMMUNITY FOCUS REPORT

2021 UPDATE

A series of white papers on the report's 11 primary topics will be published on a rolling basis ahead of the 2021 edition. For news, podcasts and more information, visit springfieldcommunityfocus.org.



EARLY CHILDHOOD

Investments for youngest citizens show results, but new and ongoing vulnerabilities affect progress.

2021 UPDATE: **EARLY CHILDHOOD**

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BLUE RIBBONS Early childhood as community priority · Adoption of Conscious Discipline methods · Legislative support for funding

RED FLAGS Economic disparities · Child abuse and neglect · Lack of support to mitigate post-trauma mental health effects

Children's services both challenged and championed

Children in Springfield and Greene County still face many potential hurdles as they grow up, but the situation continues to look brighter than it did when the first Community Focus Report was completed. The region has become more aware of early childhood issues and more committed to its youngest citizens.

Widespread support for initiatives related to early childhood, a strong sense of collaboration and a commitment to establish a long-term sustainable funding stream assure a strong infrastructure locally as the state of Missouri begins to catch up. Springfield's leadership and pioneering spirit have positioned us to benefit from new and innovative state-wide policies being considered to help

children ages 6 and under, including expanding free preschool offerings, state-wide kindergarten-readiness indicators, regional hubs and a quality assurance program. These are in various stages of development; however, the notion that they will become a part of the early childhood fabric of our state is a testament to our community's early trailblazing.

Still, there is much work to be done. The disparities of race and income equity continue to challenge access to high-quality early childhood experiences. Children in our community are still abused at a rate higher than the state average, and the impact of that trauma on children in classrooms and on their future provides us with a host of challenges.

The Red Flags of past Community



PHOTO COURTESY OF SPRINGFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Fulbright Early Childhood Center, which opened for the 2020–21 school year, is named in memory of Adah Fulbright, a long-time educator recognized for her commitment and dedication to educating Black students during a time in history when segregation existed. Located in southwest Springfield, the facility can serve up to 250 preschool students.

COVID-19 IMPACT

During the early months of the pandemic, 54.7% of childcare programs in Greene County were temporarily or permanently closed. As of January 2021, Greene County had lost 715 licensed spots from pre-pandemic numbers. The number has rebounded slightly; however, there have been more than 400 slots that were permanently lost due to closures and inability to recruit and retain qualified staff.

The burden of caring for children weighs heavily on the backs of economically vulnerable women and women of color. Early childhood educators were some of the most vulnerable members of our society, particularly in the first days of the pandemic. They were on the front lines without benefit of health insurance, adequate protective gear or sick leave. Child care was considered an essential workforce; however, programs struggled to find an adequate supply of the necessary protective gear.

Child care providers, who typically earn minimum wage without benefits, served the

community and cared for its children so others could provide essential services. They watched as the community lauded and paid respect to schoolteachers, medical personnel and police officers while asking early childhood teachers to step into small classrooms and provide intimate care, in contact with bodily fluids, often without masks or paid time off.

In addition, the child care profession is poorly positioned to benefit from virtual training. As providers were not able to access in-person training, they were pushed toward virtual options, many of which did not have the infrastructure, technology or proper support.

Developmental screenings of young children are down 75% from previous years, which translates to an inability to make referrals for delays. Furthermore, when children are identified with delays, they are not able to receive services in person to address their needs. Virtual learning is a challenge, and for children with developmental delays, its positive impact

is often negligible.

On the bright side, the child care community worked quickly to determine how to continue serving and supporting families safely. Parents As Teachers, Early Learning Leadership Academy (ELLA) directors, home visitors, Educare, Head Start and Early Head Start, First Steps providers, parent education programs and others went virtual and figured out how to continue services. Organizations also helped families navigate other issues of the pandemic like learning to use online conferencing tools and connecting them to resources.

The Springfield-Greene County Library District staff adjusted services to provide online blog posts, virtual programming and take-home kits to keep families learning and engaged at home. Discovery Center, Cox-Health, and Boys and Girls Clubs were able to find creative ways to serve children during the spring and summer of 2020 to ensure safe care while their essential-worker parents worked.



2021 UPDATE: **EARLY CHILDHOOD**

► HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE SPRINGFIELD? SUBMIT YOUR RESPONSE AT [SGFENGAGE.ORG](https://sgfengage.org)

Focus Reports have not been resolved and continue to threaten our children's best possible outcomes.

BLUE RIBBONS

Springfield has taken a bold step in **investing in children as a community priority**.

The Springfield-Greene County Library District has found multiple ways to support the literacy needs of families, continuing the widely popular Summer Reading Program, Racing to Read events, Storytime & More episodes, and Takeout Kits to keep kids busy while learning at home.

Additionally, the Darr Family Foundation, the Community Foundation of the Ozarks and the Musgrave Foundation have committed more than \$1 million over five years to support early learning and professional development in child care, private preschools, Springfield Public Schools preschools and elementary schools—an effort that is beginning to show success. The financial investment and ability to join forces to bring high-level national training and support to our community has forged a strong and lasting impact on programs, educators and children.

Programs are beginning to record significant child and classroom outcomes. Children's social and emotional assessments and teacher/child interactions show promise. Broad community support and funding for early childhood-related initiatives, such as Parents As Teachers and expanding public school spots for preschool children, leads the region in long-term investment in our future.

Springfield's commitment to implement brain-based, trauma-informed programming is beginning to pay dividends. More than 1,500 local educators have received comprehensive training and coaching in **Conscious Discipline**, an evidence-based, trauma-informed approach. It is recognized by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices and received high ratings in eight of 10 categories in a Harvard University analysis of the nation's top 25 social-emotional

learning programs. The Council of Churches of the Ozarks' Early Childhood One Stop has refined a parent component, Conscious Parenting, teaching more than 600 parents how to support the classroom instruction their children are receiving.

Sustaining these efforts requires a **long-term, viable funding stream**, and our local legislators have continued to propose enabling legislation that would allow citizens to vote on a sales tax initiative. The bill passed both the Missouri House and Senate; however, it was vetoed due to other unrelated bill components. Sustainable funding opportunities are available in other parts of the state, and Greene County continues to look for ways to replicate those options.

RED FLAGS

The **gap in economic disparity**—a Red Flag in the 2019 Community Focus Report—is widening, and children in our community are particularly vulnerable to its effects. Families who struggle to pay the rising costs of housing, food and utilities are often forced to choose substandard care for their children.

From 2009 to 2019, the number of licensed child-care facilities locally has decreased by 32%. As state regulations change in order for child-care providers to qualify to accept child-care subsidy payments, fewer are choosing to participate. The number of subsidized slots in Missouri decreased by 78% from 2010 to 2020. When high-quality programs are not accepting subsidy payments, families are forced to choose piecemeal arrangements or low-quality care.

In the last three Kindergarten Readiness studies conducted by the Mayor's Commission for Children, an average of 46% of those who did not attend a high-quality program (or who are cared for in makeshift arrangements) were not ready to enter kindergarten. That compares with 18% of children who did attend a formal preschool program. According to the studies, overall kindergarten readiness has hovered around 26%.

Research from James Heckman, professor of economics at the University of Chicago, shows that high-quality birth-to-five

SUCCESS STORY



PHOTO COURTESY OF CFO

In 2019, Community Foundation of the Ozarks President Brian Fogle, right, presented former News-Leader Executive Editor David Stoeffler with a framed photo that was originally published on the paper's front page as part of a special series on children in poverty. The coverage led to the creation of the Every Child Promise. An endowment at the CFO, named in Stoeffler's honor, now provides a permanent source of scholarships for early childhood education.

Six years of Every Child Promise scholarships have afforded hundreds of children the opportunity to attend high-quality preschool programs and narrow the opportunity gap.

Victoria Ross, a mother of a child who received a scholarship, wrote in a post-scholarship letter: "... during this intense year of 2020, I found myself feeling extra thankful for where my son and I are at in our lives. We fell through the income gaps during his time in preschool, which left me wondering how I was ever going to make tuition week to week. We weren't in the worst of situations, by any means, but we weren't in the best. Thanks to the ECP scholarship and support, we made it.

"My son is so smart," Ross continued. "He loves baseball, playing video games, being a big brother and helping his family. The scholarship that was provided for him truly solidified his education foundation and had led him to be a more successful child in education today. He had wonderful teachers in preschool, and I credit them highly on everything they did for him, educationally, emotionally and further providing him with the best stability he could have ever asked for. He didn't ask for a 'single mom' at the time, but I was never alone. He was never alone. We've always been humbled by the support we received, and I'll never forget it."

Since Every Child Promise began offering scholarships in 2014, 609 children have received a scholarship to one of 20 preschools in Springfield. The outcomes are extraordinary, with post-DECA kindergarten readiness assessments among scholarship recipients averaging 98.6%. With the establishment of the David Stoeffler Every Child Promise Endowment in fall 2019, scholarship opportunities will be available for Springfield's children in perpetuity.

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programs for disadvantaged children deliver a 13% per year return on investment, gains that are achieved through better outcomes in education, health, social behaviors and employment. It is an investment we cannot afford to miss. To be able to reduce the gap, our community must commit to focusing on families who have not yet accessed early childhood support opportunities, including home visitation and early care and education.

Childhood trauma continues to affect our community's children, which not only impacts their social and emotional well-being, but their long-term health outcomes, employment opportunities and future success. **Child abuse and neglect**, a persistent Red Flag identified the Community Focus Report, has increased and returned to 2016 rates, increasing by 18% in the last year, and effects of pandemic lockdown are not fully known.

While many communities experienced a decrease of abuse and neglect in 2020, Greene County's rate remains consistently high. In 2020, more than 1,000 children were in foster care with an average of 735 children in foster care on any given day. On average, 36 children entered foster care each month in 2020, compared with an average of 25 children entering foster care each month in 2019. This highlights the need to strengthen services to prevent child abuse and neglect, and advocate for programming and support for youth aging out of foster care. There is also a continuing need for community members to serve as foster parents and Court Appointed Special Advocates.

The community awareness around the impact of trauma has been heightened; however, there is **a lack of widespread support for mitigating the corresponding mental health issues**. Young children are struggling to manage strong emotions, and staff are not adequately trained to address the trauma in ways that have long-term, positive impact. Our community does not collect comprehensive data on the numbers of young children suspended or expelled from programs. What is known is that, nationally, preschoolers are expelled at three times the rate of children in kindergarten

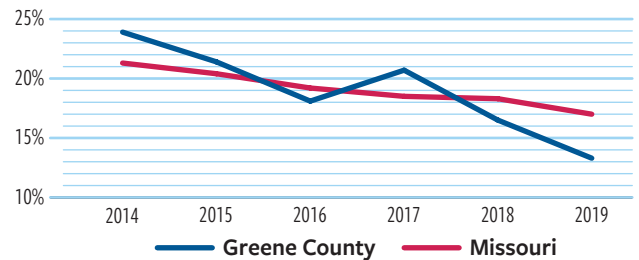
through 12th grade; preschool-aged boys are four times as likely to be expelled as girls are; and Black children are expelled almost twice as often as Latino and white children and more than five times as often as Asian American children.

Parents often switch preschool programs prior to the program taking action to reduce the risk of their child being labeled or stereotyped as "bad." Children who are not afforded the opportunity to attend preschool—those not allowed to attend because they were kicked out—will struggle with kindergarten readiness and school success. The system yearns for proper mental-health intervention to address these strains.

The Early Childhood 2021 Update was produced by Dana Carroll of Community Partnership of the Ozarks with input from Jennifer Crouch, Christy Davis, Laura Farmer, Nicole Piper, Kimberly Shinn Brown and Stephanie Smallwood.

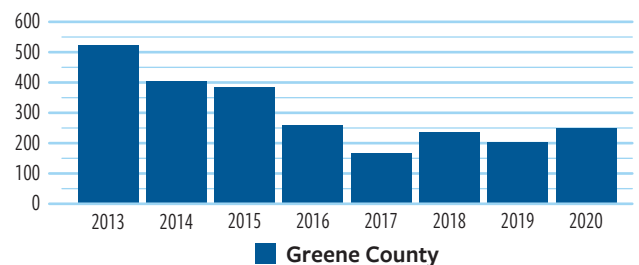
KEY METRICS

Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate



SOURCE: MISSOURI KIDS COUNT

Substantiated Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect



SOURCE: MISSOURI KIDS COUNT

LEGISLATIVE IMPACT

With only 45 total policy bills passed this legislative session, there was little opportunity for impact to early childhood issues; however, there were a few legislative wins for children in the Missouri Legislature.

HB 432, which passed this session, allows SNAP and WIC recipients to use their benefits at farmers' markets. It also gives parents the right to record meetings for special-needs students, creates a "Hands-Up" pilot for child care transitional benefits, and adds protection for a child's right to counsel. Additionally, HB 557 was passed providing safeguards to protect children in unlicensed residential care facilities. Gov. Mike Parson signed the bill into law in July.

Furthermore, the budget for fiscal 2022 included significant victories for children and families with more than \$90 million in new support for kinship, foster and adoptive care support, and \$2 million in new funding for developmental screenings for children administered through Parents as Teachers. The state also merged 150 staff and \$650 million in funding to create the Office of Childhood.

Prior to 2021, Missouri ranked as one of the most fragmented early childhood statewide systems in the country, according to the Bipartisan

Policy Center. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Department of Social Services, and Department of Health and Senior Services all provide programming for child care and parents of young children. This absence of coordination wastes money, causes confusion and lack of consistency in services to children and families.

Gov. Mike Parson recognized the need to strengthen the early childhood system, so his office proposed moving most of the state's early childhood programs into one office. DESE will house programs related to early childhood, home visiting and child care in the newly developed Office of Childhood.

Although the reorganization will be a challenge initially, the streamlining of programs is already being realized. Initially, funding will remain unchanged, and services will stay the same. However, over time, families should see increased program effectiveness and ease of access. The intent is to streamline services, so families will not be as impacted as children transition from program to program. Additionally, this new structure will allow for coordinated indicators and outcomes and is expected to allow for strategic future funding opportunities.

