Strategic Initiatives Grant Program – Early Childhood

Strategic Initiatives is the tightly focused facet of the Stranahan Foundation’s philanthropy, and supports efforts that promote and nurture effective teaching in early childhood settings. This focus was selected after an intensive planning process that included consultation with national education experts and providers. Ultimately, our research led the Board to conclude that the quality of teaching and adult/child interactions are vital to learning and development, particularly during the early years.

The Stranahan Foundation Strategic Initiatives Early Childhood grant program is separate and distinct from the grant application opportunities discussed elsewhere on this website.

The Foundation cannot accept unsolicited grant proposals for the early childhood program. That is, only organizations that have been invited by the Stranahan Foundation are eligible to submit requests for support for early childhood programs. We have not yet scheduled our next early childhood request for proposal (RFP) cycle.

We do have an ongoing interest in receiving suggestions (not proposals) – from other funders, nonprofit organizations or early childhood experts – regarding programs/initiatives that might fit with the Foundation’s early childhood priorities. Such suggestions are kept on file for potential consideration during future RFP cycles.

To review the Foundation’s “Synopsis of Early Childhood Priorities”, scroll down to the next section below. If you would like to suggest a program that you believe may be a strong fit with these priorities, you may complete an “Early Childhood Suggestion Form”. Click here to open a copy of the form. Again, please note that the next RFP cycle has not yet been scheduled. Any suggestions submitted at this time will be reviewed and kept on file for possible future consideration.

If you have any questions regarding the Foundation’s early childhood priorities, please contact our CEO, Pam Howell-Beach, at phb@stranahanfoundation.org.

Synopsis of Early Childhood Priorities

The Stranahan Foundation supports strategies to ensure effective teaching in early childhood settings. Consistent with the body of early childhood research, we believe that the quality of teachers and teaching in early childhood programs is critical in determining the impact these programs have on children’s learning and development. Effective early childhood teachers create a nurturing, supportive, and well-organized environment that facilitates children’s development, and they provide high-quality, intentional learning opportunities that build children’s knowledge and skills.

To do this important work, teachers need a deep knowledge of both early childhood development and the content domains, as well as practical strategies and skills to translate this knowledge into high-quality learning experiences for young children. They must also know how to work effectively with parents and families; meet the individual needs of culturally, ethnically, and developmentally diverse learners; and support the development of the whole child across the full range of developmental domains. We are
interested in strategies that build early childhood educators’ knowledge and skills and support them in implementing effective teaching strategies in their classrooms.

We are interested in a variety of strategies to promote effective teaching in early childhood settings, including (but not limited to):

- Preschool programs whose exemplary strategies to ensure effective teaching can serve as models for the field.
- Initiatives that build the skills and knowledge of existing early childhood workers to enable them to become effective teachers.
- Initiatives that attract new, highly skilled teachers to the early childhood field and support them to remain in the profession.
- Initiatives that provide support to enable early childhood educators to implement effective teaching strategies and practices.
- Strategies to evaluate the quality of teaching in early childhood settings and use this data to drive improvements in early childhood teacher effectiveness.

Initiatives to improve the quality of early childhood teaching may include strategies to raise the educational credentials or compensation of early childhood teachers, or to improve retention and reduce staff turnover. However, we do not view these goals as ends in themselves.

We believe that strategies to ensure effective early childhood teaching must be nested in a broader context that:

- Supports the development of the whole child, including health, nutrition and other comprehensive services when necessary;
- Engages parents as partners and first teachers; and
- Links high-quality early learning with effective K-12 public schools and/or K-12 school reforms to ensure that children’s early learning gains are sustained throughout their education.

We understand that effective programs can address these goals in a variety of ways.

We prioritize investments that serve children with the greatest needs, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We do not expect that our investments will exclusively benefit this population, but we will not invest in early childhood initiatives that do not serve disadvantaged children.

Profiles of Early Childhood Grantees

The Stranahan Foundation Board launched the Strategic Initiatives Early Childhood Grant Program in late 2011. Following are examples of projects that have been approved for grants since that time:

**Agenda for Children**, New Orleans, LA, works to improve child well-being in Louisiana through three key strategies:

- Improving the quality of early childhood education through training, coaching and technical assistance in the early care and education sector in Southeast Louisiana;
- Informing public discussions on children by monitoring the well-being of children at the state and parish levels through the KIDS COUNT project; and
- Advocating for better policies and programs to serve Louisiana's children throughout the legislative and regulatory processes.

The Foundation’s grant assisted with Agenda’s feasibility study and development of a business plan for establishing a comprehensive Early Care and Education Professional Development Institute that would
provide training, technical assistance and coaching for early childhood teachers in center-based, school and other early childhood settings throughout the region, and ultimately the state.

**AppleTree Early Learning**, Washington, D.C., is a full-day preschool dedicated to providing children with the social, emotional, and cognitive foundations that will enable them to succeed in school and beyond. AppleTree’s educational model is firmly grounded in research about effective education for preschool-aged children, and has been rigorously evaluated by independent researchers. Many children enter AppleTree with significant deficits in early language, literacy, and math skills, and after two years in the program are performing above the national average, results that are virtually unmatched in the field.

The most recent grant award is supporting AppleTree in developing “Tier 2” and “Tier 3” resources aligned with its Every Child Ready instructional model. AppleTree uses a three-tiered Response-to-Intervention (RTI) approach to meet the needs of all students and ensure children enter kindergarten ready to thrive. RTI is an educational strategy that uses early, systematic assistance to help children who are having difficulty learning, in order to prevent children from falling far behind and reduce the need for special education services. In the RTI model, “Tier 1” refers to the current high-quality instruction provided to all students. “Tier 2” are targeted interventions for children who are having difficulty mastering certain skills and concepts. “Tier 3” are customized services for children who have been identified with disabilities. AppleTree is developing 10 six-week mathematics intervention units and 10 six-week language and literacy intervention units designed to help teachers deliver Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction for pre-school students struggling with key components of math, language, and early literacy.

**Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP Tulsa)** is a nationally-regarded early childhood education program serving children birth through pre-K. The Foundation’s grant has supported an array of activities designed to improve teaching practice and improve outcomes for the children they serve. Grant-supported initiatives include:

- **My Teaching Partner/University of Oklahoma Training** to empower CAP Tulsa’s Instructional Coaches to provide in-house professional development, coaching and mentoring for classroom teachers;
- **Develop/implement an online Talent Management System** to enable CAP Tulsa to better track and analyze talent management data to improve teacher effectiveness and to analyze the relationship of CLASS scores, and site leader evaluations, to indicators of student learning;
- **Develop and implement the Pilot Child Assessment System**, a set of multiple, developmentally appropriate measures of children’s learning and development to be administered to a sample of children for the purpose of evaluating its impact on student learning and identifying strengths, weaknesses, and trends;
- **Placing and supervising Teach For America corps members in CAP Tulsa classrooms during Teach For America’s summer institute** in order to prepare these corps members to work in early childhood settings in the following school year; and
• Implementation (including teacher training) of the Building Blocks preschool math curriculum.

**Comprehensive Community Child Care - 4C for Children** in Cincinnati is utilizing grant funds to expand the Community of Learners teacher professional development model to serve 6 additional childcare center sites serving low-income families. The goal of the Community of Learners model is to facilitate increased kindergarten readiness for preschoolers by supporting teachers to implement a more intentional teaching approach in which they assess children’s development, set clear goals for children’s progress, plan learning activities that help children reach those goals, and reflect afterwards on their strategies and results produced. The program also works with program administrators because engaged and supportive leadership is crucial to enabling teachers to successfully implement and sustain new practices.

The **Erikson Institute New Schools Project** works in Chicago Public Schools to support entire school communities in implementing preschool through third grade education reform strategies. The Project stresses partnerships among school administrators, teachers, and families. The Project provides ongoing professional development that is embedded in the school communities in which educators work. Professional development occurs in repeating cycles that include PD labs, classroom-based one-on-one coaching to support teachers in application of PD content in the classroom, and team-based sharing and problem solving among teachers in a school or grade level. Each school site selects a particular issue or issues that it wants to work on (such as literacy) to improve children’s PreK-3rd learning outcomes. Schools are engaged in NSP intensively for 3 years, at which time project organizers intend that, with a reduced level of support, the schools can take responsibility for continuing the program in future years. Schools that have completed the 3-year intensive program are then eligible to participate in an ongoing community of practice with other NSP schools.

**First Steps’ Early Learning Communities** program in Grand Rapids, MI works with in-home childcare providers - such as family, friends and neighbors – where the most vulnerable children receive care. The cornerstone of the program is the weekly Play and Learn Group, where caregivers and children up to five years of age participate together in activities led by experienced early childhood educators. Group leaders model age-appropriate activities and adult/child interactions, with a focus on play as a means for building oral language and early literacy skills. Caregivers also attend professional training sessions to help them learn skills and strategies to support the development and learning of children in their care. Registered caregivers may receive credit toward quality improvement (both for training and for participation in Play & Learn) in the state’s tiered quality rating and improvement system. Child care subsidy reimbursement from the state (for eligible children) may increase as the caregiver reaches quality benchmarks.

**Georgetown University** is undertaking a research project designed to evaluate the long-term impacts of high quality pre-k on the cohort of Tulsa pre-k students who entered kindergarten in the fall of 2006. These students entered 8th grade in the fall of 2014. The evaluation will contribute to knowledge in the field in three key ways: (a) evaluate whether the academic gains experienced in pre-K persist through 8th grade; (b) explore whether there are differences in social skills, social capital, and perceptions of risky behavior between 8th graders who did and did not participate in high-quality pre-k; and (c) explore the
role of teacher quality, student mobility, and family engagement factors in mediating longer-term impacts of pre-k.

**Manaus Fund Little Bus (El Busesito)** program in Carbondale, CO is a mobile classroom providing developmentally appropriate early learning experiences for 3-5-year-old children living in rural, isolated areas. Retrofitted school buses have been converted to preschool classrooms, and the buses travel to 6 different sites close to where families live. Each 90-minute preschool class on El Busesito includes choice time, whole group circle/story time, an arts or crafts project, music, and gross motor activity. Classes are taught by experienced, bilingual early childhood educators, who are supported by a bilingual Latina teaching assistant.

**Meridian Community College** in Meridian, MS is providing: (a) a series of two hour workshops for early childhood workers to assist them in understanding and implementing appropriate practices that support young children’s learning and development, and (b) weekly parent-child sessions intended to build parents’ (or other family caregivers’) ability to support their children in developing age-appropriate social, physical and language skills and independence. Parent/child sessions, led by experienced early childhood educators, include modeling age-appropriate expectations and interactions and a music and movement activity. Grant funds also allowed Meridian early childhood faculty and BEEP staff to obtain training in ECERS-R and ITERS-R, and BEEP staff to attend annual workshops/conferences sponsored by local, state, regional, and national early childhood education associations.

The **Ounce of Prevention Fund** in Chicago piloted its Professional Development Initiative (PDI) to fill a gap for community-based, birth-to-five early childhood centers, which often lack the resources to provide teachers with high-quality, comprehensive professional development and support. PDI engaged teachers and center leaders in a series of learning cycles designed to enhance the organizational conditions that support teachers’ continuous learning and improvement, and that lead to improved teacher-child interactions and stronger outcomes for high-needs children. This three-year, job-embedded, intensive professional development program included: (a) training; (b) coaching; and (c) peer learning in reflective practice groups with teachers, leaders and coaches. The ultimate goal is to advance the skills, knowledge and dispositions of teachers and leaders to provide rich early learning experiences that improve kindergarten readiness outcomes for the infants, toddlers and preschoolers in their care. The Foundation initially provided a matching grant to help support the three-year pilot of PDI. Grant funds are currently supporting an external evaluation of this project.

**Southwest Human Development’s Early Childhood Quality Initiative** will provide intensive training and coaching designed to improve the quality of teaching in Maricopa County early childhood centers. This initiative will build on the organization’s deep expertise in providing high-quality coaching and professional development services. Participating classrooms will receive eight hours a week of onsite coaching, modeling, practice, video review, and feedback. The program will also include peer Learning Communities for participating teachers. The ultimate goal is to equip teachers to provide rich early learning experiences that improve outcomes for the children they serve.
Tulane University Institute of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health, New Orleans, LA received a Foundation grant to expand the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation program to pre-K through 2nd grade teachers at two charter schools and two community-based childcare centers that partner with the schools. The program connects trained early childhood mental health consultants with early childhood educators, to provide mental health consultation, classroom coaching, and social skills groups to help early childhood educators support children’s social-emotional development and mental health; structure and manage classrooms in ways that promote positive behavior and reduce negative behaviors; and craft specific strategies and interventions in response to children experiencing behavior challenges. Over time, the approach is designed to build the capacity of early childhood educators to support children’s social-emotional development and respond effectively to challenging behaviors.

University of Florida – Lastinger Center is creating Early Learning Florida, an online platform that will serve as a one-stop, blended professional development system for Florida early childhood teachers. Early Learning Florida will include a series of interactive, engaging professional development modules (in both English and Spanish) for early childhood educators. The program will also include an online learning community that will enable early childhood educators to engage in reflection and share best practices and ideas with their peers. It is envisioned that, ultimately, Florida’s 31 early learning coalitions across the state will integrate Early Learning Florida into locally delivered professional learning opportunities, combining the online content with in-person trainings. The program is being piloted in select urban and rural communities, with the expectation that, after the second year, this resource will be available to 55,000 early learning professionals across the state.