

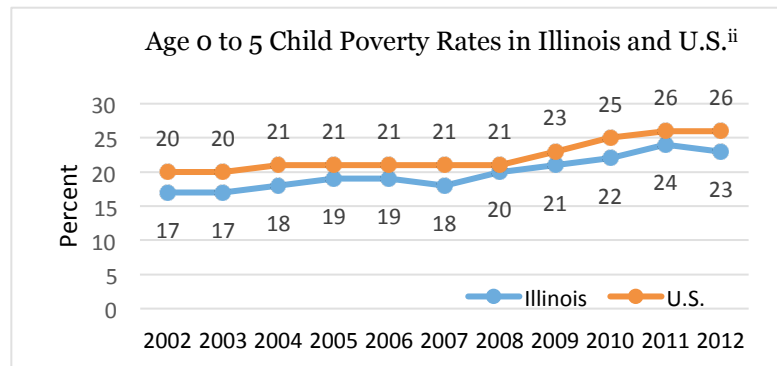
## EVANSTON COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

### Every child ready for kindergarten, every youth ready for work

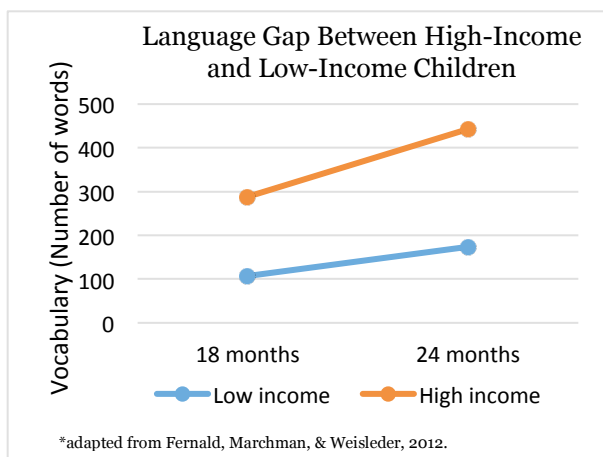
Terri J. Sabol

#### The Problem.

Children's overall wellbeing has declined during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly since the Great Recession. Families with young children are less economically secure than they were three decades ago, due in large part to decreases in secure parental employment and the median family income.<sup>i</sup> In Illinois, approximately one fourth of young children age 0 to 5 (n=225,000) live in families with incomes below the poverty level (\$23,283 for a family of four in 2013), an increase over the past decade (see Figure).<sup>ii</sup> In Evanston, over 11% of families with children live below the poverty line, up from 9% from 2002.<sup>iii</sup>



Children experiencing economic hardship face a number of obstacles to later life success. The United States trails most of the industrialized world in terms of social mobility, and it is increasingly difficult for young children to escape from the intergenerational cycle of poverty.<sup>iv</sup> A key challenge to reducing inequality and promoting social mobility is the income-based achievement gap.<sup>vi</sup> By age 2, children from low-income families have significantly lower cognitive skills compared to their more affluent peers, and this gap continues through early childhood. At age 4, children in the lowest-income families score on average in the 34<sup>th</sup> percentile in literacy and math compared to children in the highest income families scored who score in the 69<sup>th</sup> percentile, a striking 35 point difference.<sup>vi</sup> The lack of equal footing from the start makes it increasingly difficult for low-income children to catch up to their higher income peers during school and eventually attain jobs that lead to financial stability.



Early experiences are key drivers in children's development and are a primary contributor to the early and persistent achievement gap. Parent and child stress caused from economic hardship can affect children's biology by activating their stress mechanisms and immune systems.<sup>v</sup> Parent-child interactions, which differ based on income level, can also affect the ways children develop. A landmark study conducted nearly two decades ago found striking variation in amounts of child-directed speech between higher income and lower

income families. By age 3, children from more economically advantaged families heard over 30 million more words directed to them than children from more disadvantaged families.<sup>vii</sup> A recent follow-up study found that children from higher income families learned over 30 percent more words from 18 months to 24 months compared to children from lower-income households (see figure).<sup>viii</sup> The variation in language exposure is subsequently related to children's later vocabulary skills and school performance.<sup>ix</sup>

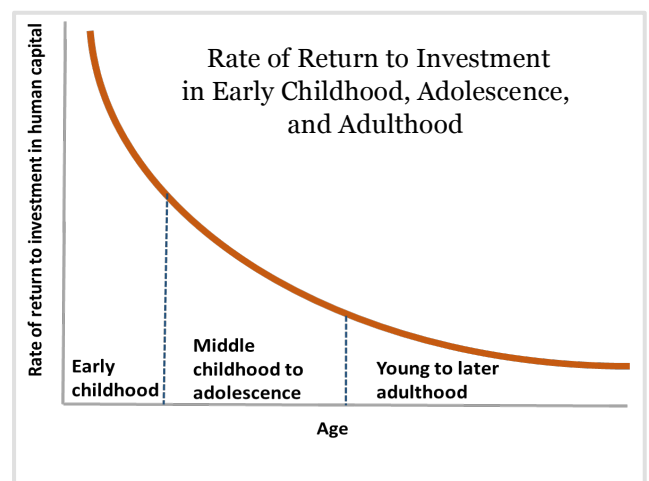
Institutional contexts, such as schools, jobs, and neighborhoods, can also affect children's academic preparedness and their later life chances. For families living in poverty, unstable work and economic hardship can heighten parents' psychological distress and decrease their parenting quality. Children from low-income backgrounds are also less likely to experience cognitively stimulating classroom environments and often live in unsafe and disadvantaged neighborhoods. As a result, many of our most vulnerable children face numerous barriers for healthy development.

### **The Solution: Invest in Young Children**

Our nation's future success and prosperity depends on the wellbeing of our children. Decades of research and evaluation demonstrate that early investment in young children and their families can promote children's development and support later productivity. Evidence from neuroscience and psychology tell us that strengthening children's early experiences help support brain architecture of very young children which sets the foundation for later learning.<sup>xi</sup> In particular, ensuring that children experience high-quality caregiving environments helps support the formation of the brain and contributes to positive skill formation and school readiness.<sup>xii</sup>

Children who start kindergarten ready to learn are more successful throughout the life course. Being ready for school means that children not only have foundational skills in reading and math, but also have critical language, social, emotional, and executive functioning skills, such as the ability to regulate emotions, work well with peers, focus on key tasks, and positively engage in the classroom environment.

If children are already behind when they start kindergarten, they are likely to continue along that path unless they encounter new opportunities, resources, or interventions.<sup>xiii</sup> The longer society waits to intervene, the more costly it is to promote adult outcomes. As a result, early investment in young children has a higher rate of return than investment in adolescence and early adulthood.<sup>xiv</sup> Every \$1 dollar spent in early childhood for economically disadvantaged children saves society \$7 in social costs later by promoting productivity across the lifespan.<sup>xiv</sup> Investment in early interventions is vital to expand opportunities for income children and provide them with the skills resources they need for positive development.



\*adapted from Heckman, 2006.

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## **Evanston Community Foundation: Smart Investments. Big Change.**

Evanston Community Foundation (ECF) invests in programs that have the greatest potential to improve the lives of young low-income children and their families. In 2007, Evanston Community Foundation received \$2 million for an endowment and \$2 million in a matching program from Grand Victoria. Since then, Evanston Community Foundation has developed the infrastructure and systems that break down existing silos and ensure that their investment has the greatest impact. The cornerstone of this investment has been in three key areas: (1) support for family support services; (2) strengthening children's early literacy and language development through targeted services; and (3) building a birth to five network.

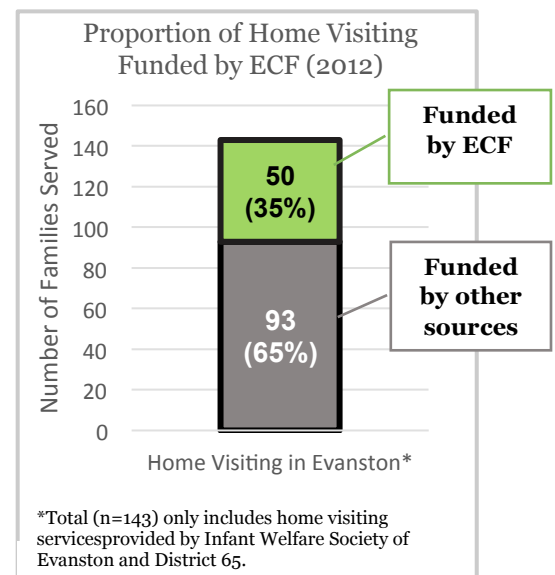
### **Family Support Services**

The Evanston Community Foundation provides funding to strengthen families across generations. ECF invests in two key evidenced-based programs— home visiting and development screening— that explicitly support families' ability to promote their children's development.

**Home Visiting Programs.** The transition to caring for a newborn can be a challenging time in a parent's life, particularly for first-time parents who may be experiencing economic hardship or who are socially isolated. Home visiting programs provide trained coaches to new parents from birth to two. Visits focus on children's health and nutrition, the home environment, parenting skills, and promoting children's development, as well as referrals to outside agencies.

Evidence from rigorous experiments suggest multiple positive effects of intensive home visiting on families and children, including higher academic performance and social skills for children in early childhood and fewer arrests in adolescence.<sup>xv</sup> In addition, high quality home visiting programs have led to lower rates of child abuse and increased maternal education.<sup>xvi</sup> Studies also demonstrate that home visiting is more effective when sessions are provide by well-trained staff who use an evidence-based curriculum during sessions. In addition, home visiting programs produce stronger results when participant retention is low and when the program is integrated within existing community agencies.<sup>xvii xviii</sup>

Drawing from this evidence, Evanston Community Foundation (ECF) invests in high quality, community-based home visiting. ECF provides funding to the Infant Welfare Society of Evanston (IWSE) and District 65 to increase the number of home visiting slots in Evanston. Currently, Evanston provides a remarkably high percentage of home visiting services, serving almost 50% of eligible families compared to the state of Illinois, which only serves 7% of eligible families. Evanston Community Foundation has been an integral partner for ensuring that low-income families have access to home visiting services in Evanston. For example, in 2012, investment from Evanston Community



Foundation led to funding for 50 families to receive home visiting, accounting for 35% of the home visiting services in their partner organizations (IWSE and District 65).

In addition, Evanston Community Foundation has built the infrastructure to support high quality home visiting programs to ensure that investments are well spent. Evanston Community Foundation provides funding to train coaches in Parents as Teachers, an evidenced-based home visiting curriculum. The Parents as Teachers program, which emphasizes positive parenting behavior and increasing parents' self-efficacy and confidence in order to prepare young children for school, has had remarkable success for low-income families, particularly when combined with comprehensive case management services.<sup>xix</sup> As a result, ECF also funds training for assessment tools that monitor parents' progress and make sure that parents receive the services they need. In addition, ECF uses the results from the assessments to communicate with partner agencies and highlight possible areas of improvement, further helping to strengthen the broader home visiting system in Evanston.

**Developmental Screening.** Developmental disabilities are chronic impairments in cognitive, language, psychological and/or physical functioning that typically emerge at a very young age.<sup>xx</sup> Early identification of young children who have developmental delays or deficits is an essential part of promoting healthy developmental and helping them reach important milestones. Yet fewer than half of pediatric doctors use developmental screeners, and less than 20 percent of children received parent-focused developmental screening.<sup>xxi</sup>

Developmental screeners are an evidence-based prevention strategy to minimize lifetime disability by ensuring that disabilities are diagnosed early, and children get access to the services they need and enter school ready to learn.<sup>xxii</sup> To date, Evanston Community Foundation has funded over 1500 developmental screeners for low-income young children living in Evanston. In addition, Evanston Community Foundation financially supported 18 children in family childcare homes receive individualized services for their developmental delays. Without ECF investment, many families would not have received the critical support needed to foster their young children's wellbeing.

### **Support for Early Language and Literacy Activities**

In addition, Evanston Community Foundation has strongly invested in activities that support children's language and literacy development. Early language and literacy skills provide a critical foundation for later school success. In the early years of a child's life, emergent reading and oral communication skills are strongly tied to the home literacy environment. Home literacy practices, including the frequency of book reading and parent book reading strategies, all promote children's language and literacy development.<sup>xxiii</sup> Yet children from low-income backgrounds are often exposed to lower quality home literacy environments compared to their more affluent peers. Recognizing this disparity, Evanston Community Foundation partnered with Evanston Public Library to provide literacy training to low-income parents. These sessions focus on increasing the frequency of shared reading activities between parents and children, effective strategies to support children's reading skills, and activities to promote children's interest in reading.

In addition, Evanston Community Foundation has supported the ABC Boosters program, an innovative program that promotes children's literacy skills outside the home. The ABC Boosters program trains teenagers to spend time each week during the summer helping 3- and 4-year-old children who have not attended preschool improve their literacy skills before entering kindergarten.

Evanston Community Foundation has also supported a number of services targeted toward English Language Learners (ELL). Children whose first language is other than English face considerable challenges for later academic performance. There is considerable debate regarding how to promote reading and language skills for children who are dual language learners, particularly before they enter kindergarten. However, most recent evidence suggests that children need support in both their home language and English to support their pre-literacy and language development.<sup>xxiv</sup> Drawing from this evidence, Evanston Community Foundation provides bilingual literacy services for toddlers. In addition, ECF provides bilingual training to family child care providers to help children who are dual language learners receive the support they need from the very beginning.

### **Building a Birth to Five Network**

The Evanston Community Foundation has also focused on systems building by developing the *Every Child Ready for Kindergarten* Network. This network promotes collaboration across agencies serving low-income children in Evanston. The *Every Child Ready for Kindergarten* Network meets bi-annually and provides professional development training for agencies as well as opportunities for agencies to voice their concerns and connect with other agencies struggling with similar issues.

In addition, the *Every Child Ready for Kindergarten* Network focuses on ways to promote positive transitions to preschool and kindergarten. There is strong evidence that successful transition into formal schooling is an important predictor of performance in elementary school. In particular, children's transition from preschool, family care, or their own home to elementary school to kindergarten, which often require mastery of a specific set of skills before entry, can be extremely challenging for both parents and children.<sup>xxv</sup>

Evanston Community Foundation draws on best practices from developmental research to help agencies support positive transitions through the *Every Child Ready for Kindergarten* Network. The Network helps facilitate clear lines of communication among early childhood agencies and the Evanston school district regarding kindergarten entry requirements. The support from ECF helps to make sure that all agencies are working together to provide seamless transitions to elementary school.

### **Evanston Community Foundation. We Drop a Pebble in the Pond...We Also Change the Pond.**

Evanston Community Foundation believes that the best way to prepare low-income children for kindergarten is to improve every system that serves them. ECF funds evidence-based programs that have the greatest potential to close the achievement gap and promote strong communities.

Building on this mission, Evanston Community Foundation is developing two, new bold initiatives that emphasize systems change. The first is the **Evanston Two-Generation Initiative**, built in partnership with Northwestern University, which strategically links educational services for both parents and children to advance the economic security of families. The Evanston Two-Generation Initiative is identified nationally as one of two inaugural place-based family engagement models supported by Ascend at the Aspen Institute. The two-generation program will provide: (1) low-income families high-quality home visiting; (2) early education from local providers for young children; and (3) workforce training as well as career counseling for parents. This new initiative puts Evanston Community Foundation at the forefront of innovative programming for low-income families.<sup>xiii xxvi</sup>

The second new initiative is the **Evanston Cradle to Career Initiative**. This initiative capitalizes on the idea of “collective impact,” which emphasizes that schools, communities, business groups and agencies can have a greater effect on young children by working together rather than working alone. The Evanston Cradle to Career Initiative will form working groups based on six themes: literacy, community poverty and stability, youth and family violence, health, career and post-secondary readiness, and parent connections. The initiative will then create a centralized infrastructure and system for continuous communication across the six themes, and support agencies ability to work together toward a common goal. The mission of the initiative is “by the age 23, all Evanston young adults will be leading productive lives, building on the resources, education, and support that they need and their families have had to help them grow into resilient, educated, self-sufficient, and socially responsible adults.”

Over the past decade, Evanston Community Foundation has demonstrated its capacity to fund innovative, high quality, evidence-based interventions and services for low-income children and their families. Your investment gives Evanston a solid foundation to reach our community’s goal that every child is ready for school and every youth is ready for work.

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<sup>i</sup> Foundation for Child Development (2013). National Child and Youth Well-Being Index (CWI). Retrieved from <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Child%20Well-Being%20Index%202013%20Final.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013). Kids County data book: National and state profiles of childhood wellbeing from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey. Retrieved from: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2002-2012 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Retrieved from: <http://factfinder2.census.gov>

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