



# Bright Steps

## Action Plan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Taking Action for High-Quality  
Early Care and Education  
for All Children  
in Knoxville-Knox County

# OVERVIEW

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## Why Early Childhood Matters

Children are born with great potential for development and learning, and positive early childhood experiences make a significant difference on a child's trajectory. What's going on in a young child's brain when playing, reading, and interacting with the adults in their world determines whether a child's developing brain provides a weak or strong foundation for future learning and development.



### **90% of brain development happens by age 5.**

Positive, healthy experiences in early childhood set the foundation for thriving academically, socially, and in life. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on the other hand, can be linked to a variety of negative adult outcomes.

## THE NEED IN KNOXVILLE-KNOX COUNTY

Research has shown that the quality of care and education during children's early years will significantly influence their life outcomes. However, we know that high-quality early care and learning environments are inaccessible for far too many families—particularly those that are economically disadvantaged.

### **Less than 2 out of every 5 Knoxville-Knox County third grade students are on grade level in reading or math.**

Our economically disadvantaged students are even further behind with only 18% on grade level in reading and 15% in math. We cannot ignore this disparity with 40% of Knoxville-Knox County children ages 0-5 living at or near federal poverty guidelines. Children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school, a factor that can lead to a variety of long-term negative outcomes.

## TAKING BRIGHT STEPS FORWARD

United Way of Greater Knoxville (UWGK) is leading an inclusive strategy to transform the Early Care and Education (ECE) System in Knoxville-Knox County. We are strengthened by our state-wide partnership with Tennesseans for Quality Early Education and the Bright Start TN Network in the development, implementation, and advocacy of the Bright Steps Action Plan.

We are laser-focused on creating a continuum of high-quality early care and education from cradle to career for our children and the families and systems that support them. We need your advocacy, talents, and engagement to drive support for Bright Steps implementation for our youngest citizens and the adults that love and serve them.

# BRIGHT STEPS DATA SNAPSHOT

**26,281** Children Under the Age of 5 in Knoxville-Knox County

**53,503** Children Under the Age of 9 in Knoxville-Knox County

**65%** of Children under the age of 6 with all available parents in the labor force in Tennessee

**66%** of Children ages 6 to 12 with all available parents in the labor force in Tennessee

## Health, Mental Health & Development

**42,130** CHILDREN (0-18) ON MEDICAID

**2,836** ELIGIBLE BUT UNINSURED

TN EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES PARTICIPATION **32%**

**82/1000** NEONATAL ABSTINENCES

**16%** CHILDREN THAT ARE FOOD-INSECURE

**47%** OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 6 WHOSE FAMILY MEMBERS READ TO THEM LESS THAN 4 DAYS PER WEEK IN TENNESSEE

**39%** OF CHILDREN AGES 9 MONTHS TO 35 MONTHS WHO RECEIVED A DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING IN TENNESSEE

## Learning Environments

**580** Voluntary Pre-K Seats

**54** Title-1 3 Year Old Pre-K Seats

**734** Head Start/Early Head Start Seats

**53** Knox County Public Elementary Schools

### Knox County Schools

**21-22 3rd Grade ELA Proficiency**

*(On Track or Mastered)*

All Students (39%)

Economically Disadvantaged (18%)

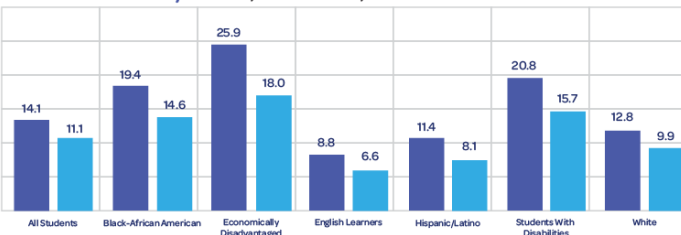
**21-22 3rd Grade Math Proficiency**

*(On Track or Mastered)*

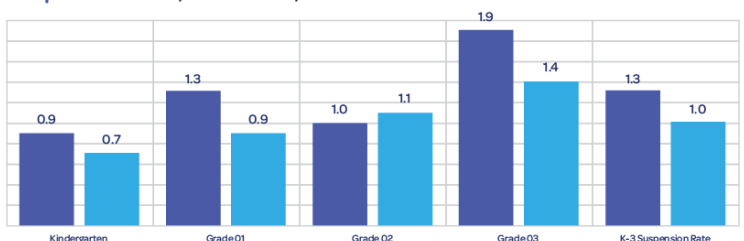
All Students (35%)

Economically Disadvantaged (15%)

Percent Chronically Absent, Grades K-8, SY19-20



Suspension Rates, Grades K-3, SY19-20



# BRIGHT STEPS DATA SNAPSHOT

## Parents and Caregivers

### POVERTY AND INCOME

**\$60,316** Median Household Budget in Knox County

**BLACK MHI** \$29,154 **WHITE MHI** \$62,071

Children Receiving SNAP | 21,288 (21.6%)

Children 0-5 Receiving WIC | 5,944 (22.4%)

Children Receiving TANF | 2,702 (2.7%)

**40%** of Children Ages 0-5 Living in Low-Income Households (200% Poverty Rate or Less)

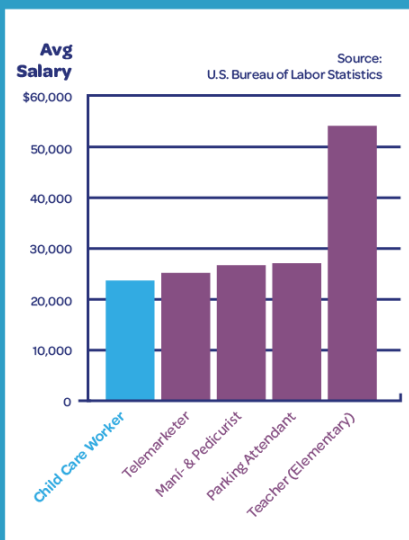
1/3 of Tennessee children under age 6 live in families with household incomes below \$40,000 and nearly half with incomes less than \$60,000 annually.

United Way's ALICE report calculates \$65,040 as a basic survival budget for a working family of two parents with an infant and a preschooler.

**Poverty rate for early childhood educators in Tennessee: 22.9%**

Much higher than for Tennessee workers in general (10.5%) and 10.2 times as high as for K-8 teachers (2.35%)

Average annual salary for child care professionals in Tennessee is **\$23,780** (less than that of parking attendants) and in most cases without benefits.



In TN the average annual price for center-based care, irrespective of quality, is \$11,068 and \$10,184 for infants and toddlers respectively.

For care in a home setting, the prices is \$7,194 for infants and \$6,749 for toddlers.

These costs represent approximately:

**18%** of median household income in Knoxville-Knox County

**72%** of income for a single parent earning minimum wage

### Child Care Cost Burden in Knox County, TN

**23%** of household income required for childcare expenses<sup>10</sup>

For families with an infant and a child in Pre-K, child care costs rise to:

**32%** of the median household income in Knoxville-Knox County

**73%** of the income for a single parent earning minimum wage

**The Business of Child Care is a Broken Model. The tension between child care workforce compensation and affordability of high-quality child care for parents and caregivers means that accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare must be subsidized for most families.**

### Child Care in Crisis

**39%** of working parents reported employment disruptions due to inadequate child care

**73%** of Knox County parents reported they cannot afford not to work

**\$69.2M** annual reduced earnings of Knox County working parents due to inadequate child care

Parents' most significant challenge finding child care:

**73%** Access

**55%** Affordability

**44%** Quality

# POLICY & ADVOCACY: MOVING BRIGHT STEPS FORWARD



## HIGH QUALITY BIRTH TO AGE 8 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Increase the number of child care providers who provide extended hours child care.

Increase funding for the early childhood system including PreK.

Reduce age requirement for Voluntary PreK classroom teaching assistants to age 16 to support CTE and paid apprenticeships in high school and post-secondary certificate programs.

DHS child care tuition reimbursement rates that reflect the true cost of delivering high quality child care.

Expansion of child care tuition reimbursement certificate eligibility to support families on the benefits cliff.

Allow a one-month proof-of-employment grace period for child care tuition certificates so that single parent/caregivers can apply and interview for jobs.

Increase staff capacity for DHS child care licensure division.

Create a separate licensure pathway for legacy child care providers to decrease licensure approval timelines.

Create a state-level birth to 18 personal identification database that would allow child care and school districts to input information about a child (like PEIMS in TX).



## SUPPORTED AND SUPPORTIVE FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Create a state-level birth to 18 personal identification database that would allow child care and school districts to input information about a child (like PEIMS in TX).

Allow employees that work for DCS or foster care contractors to become foster parents themselves.

Increase staff capacity of TN Department of Children's Services social worker division.



## HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH, AND DEVELOPMENT

Eliminate co-pays on medical services for all families, including undocumented families, below 200% of the federal poverty level.

Adequate insurance reimbursement for cost of care for clinical psychologists to diagnose autism spectrum disorders.

Increase access to mental health supports for children and families by increased public funding supports and broadened eligibility criteria.

Ensuring support of parity in telehealth reimbursement for mental and physical health visits.



Scan the QR code to read the full Bright Steps Action Plan.





## HIGH QUALITY BIRTH TO AGE 8 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

### INDIVIDUALS

Discuss how to support your child's learning at home with a childcare professional or early childhood educator.

Donate to local 501c3 childcare providers.

Sign up to volunteer at your local school.

### ORGANIZATIONS

Consider whether your business site might be a good candidate for a Micro Center.

Evaluate whether your company has family-friendly business policies like flexible schedules.

Sign up to volunteer at your local childcare center or school.

### ELECTED OFFICIALS

Invest in high-quality care in communities where families with infants and toddlers have the least access to it.

Work with public financing managers to better understand the amount of money being spent on children—where it is coming from and where it is going.

Sign the petition to support legislation like Promising Futures at [www.promisingfutures.org](http://www.promisingfutures.org).



## SUPPORTED AND SUPPORTIVE FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

### INDIVIDUALS

Identify a community group that provides education and raises awareness about informal education and career exploration opportunities for economically disadvantaged families.

Attend Free Monthly Family Nights at local children's museum, Muse Knoxville, to gain high-quality educational experiences and parent/caregiver engagement opportunities.

### ORGANIZATIONS

When hosting events that ask economically disadvantaged family members to participate, consider providing a financial stipend equivalent to a thriving wage for their time committed.

### ELECTED OFFICIALS

Examine policies and procedures to ensure they do not disproportionately impact families with young children.



## HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH, AND DEVELOPMENT

### INDIVIDUALS

Learn about children's developmental milestones.

Read with your child.

Do simple activities like those found in the Bright Steps Activity Packs every day with children to promote brain development and social emotional bonding.

### ORGANIZATIONS

Consider family-friendly benefits such as expanding Employee Savings Accounts to include child care fees, choosing health care packages with early intervention coverage and lowered co-pays, etc.

Offer implicit bias, cultural competence, trauma-informed practice, and poverty simulation trainings for staff.

### ELECTED OFFICIALS

Require agency staff to go through Adverse Childhood Experience and trauma-informed customer service training.

Work with legislative delegation to craft legislation tying TennCare Behavioral Health provider rates automatically to increases in medical inflation, ensuring competitive compensation rates.



# BRIGHT STEPS ACTION PLAN

The recommendations put forth, informed by local, state, and national research, were developed collaboratively with an intentional focus on equity, preventing and mitigating the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACES), and on reasonable, measurable outcomes.

## HIGH QUALITY BIRTH TO AGE 8 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

### GOALS

A 5% increase in the number of economically disadvantaged children birth through 3rd grade receiving high quality early care and education outside of the home by June 30, 2025. (Baseline to be established Fall 2023.)

By the end of the 2024-2025 school year the number of economically disadvantaged 3rd grade students scoring on-track or mastered in ELA and MATH on the State of TN's TCAP assessments will have increased by 15 percentage points in Knox County Schools.

### STRATEGIES

**Expand TN All Corps Tutoring support for K-3rd graders in out of school environments to provide high-dosage, low-ratio reading tutoring through out of school community partnerships**

**Development of an Early Care and Education Workforce Development System**

**Development of Early Care Shared Services Networks**

## SUPPORTED AND SUPPORTIVE FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

### GOALS

A 25% increase of economically disadvantaged families with children ages 0-3rd grade reporting that they have sufficient access to community resources, parenting knowledge and skills to meet their family's basic needs by June 30, 2025. (Baseline to be established Fall 2023.)

By the start of the 2025-2026 school year, Knox County Schools will see a 10% increase in the number of economically disadvantaged public-school students regarded as having been equipped with the skills necessary to be successful in Kindergarten. (Baseline to be established Fall 2023.)

### STRATEGIES

**Development of an Early Care and Education Resource Hub**

**Supporting Awareness Campaign for the Knoxville-Knox County ECE System**

**Activating an Early Care and Education Coalition to Better Align System Partners Toward Shared Outcomes and Goals of the Bright Steps Action Plan**

**Development of a Transition Plan from PreK to Kindergarten**

## HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH, AND DEVELOPMENT

### GOAL

Increase of 5% in the percentage of economically disadvantaged children birth through 3rd grade who get developmental screenings, early intervention services, and health and wellness screenings and services as needed by June 30, 2025. (Baseline to be established Fall 2023.)

### STRATEGIES

**Expansion of Family-Centered Mental Health Services**

**Expanded Support of the Community Schools Strategy and Additional Community School Place-Based Strategies that Support Early Childhood Development**

**Assess Pediatric Provider Awareness of Early Childhood Developmental Needs**



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