



# EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IMPACT REPORT

**UNITED WE CAN**  
Pave Pathways to Success



**UNITED WAY**  
Greater Knoxville



# EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION AT-A-GLANCE

Children are born with great potential for development and learning. Positive early childhood experiences have a significant impact on a child's trajectory. Research shows that the quality of early care and education during a child's first few years significantly influences their life outcomes.

While we recognize the importance of high-quality early care and learning environments, this remains inaccessible for many families—particularly those that are economically disadvantaged. With **26,281 children** too young to start kindergarten in Knox County, childcare centers are essential for working parents.

At United Way of Greater Knoxville (UWGK), we are working alongside childcare providers, schools, parents, community leaders, advocates, and more to ensure all families have equitable access to high-quality early childhood programs.

Our goal is to make Knoxville-Knox County the best place in the nation for a child to be born and raised. We envision the Greater Knoxville area with a strong educational system, thriving families, and a vibrant community.

The average cost of childcare in Tennessee is **\$11,068** annually, exceeding some in-state college tuition. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, childcare should cost no more than **seven percent** of a family's household income. With the current cost of childcare, a single parent would need to make **over \$142,000** to meet this threshold.



# HAVE YOU MET **ALICE?**

**ALICE** stands for **A**sset **L**imited,  
**I**ncome **C**onstrained, and **E**mployed.

This acronym represents the growing number of families that are living above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) but are still unable to afford the basics.

According to ALICE data in 2022, **53% of children in Tennessee** are experiencing financial hardship—living in a household below the FPL or ALICE threshold. This number is even higher for marginalized communities with **72% of Hispanic children** and **69% of Black children** facing financial challenges. These struggling households are forced to make impossible choices every day between the basics of housing, childcare, food, transportation, healthcare, and technology.



Learn more about ALICE  
in our community.

# 90%

**of brain development happens by age 5.**

Positive, healthy experiences in early childhood set the foundation for kids to thrive academically, socially, and in life.



# OUR WORK AND OUTCOMES

## Early Care and Education in Our Community

Currently, **73% of ALICE children** are not enrolled in preschool, and **65% of millennial and Gen Z workers** with children under six years of age are stressed about paying for childcare. Early learning experiences have an exponential impact on children's future academic and social success. Through our early care and education work and Community Schools initiative, we are helping kids start strong.

**Your support of UWGK  
has a direct impact on  
young learners.**

With your help, we launched our **Bright Steps Action Plan** to create a strategic framework for improving early care and education in Knoxville-Knox County. Informed by local, state, and national research, the plan was developed collaboratively and determined three main priorities— **(1) high-quality birth through age eight learning environments, (2) supported and supportive families and communities, and (3) health, mental health, and development.** These priorities have guided our work and initiatives to help us create the greatest impact.

## CREATING MORE CHILDCARE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORKING PARENTS

Between December 2019 and March 2021, **nearly 16,000 childcare centers** closed permanently across the United States, denying working families access to childcare. Today in Knox County, **65%** of households with kids younger than six have all adults in the workforce. In 1975, that number was **35%**.

Childcare is more important than ever before. With many families struggling to access affordable, high-quality childcare, we are creating more available spots for kids in new and existing programs. UWGK is also connecting with local employers to help them understand how they can create an environment that supports working parents. Our proposed solutions include flexible work arrangements, on-site childcare facilities, childcare reimbursement programs, parental leave, employee assistance programs, and more.

Our team worked with Knox County Schools (KCS) and the YMCA of East Tennessee to create our community's first innovative micro-center to support recruitment and retention of KCS employees. The center provides on-site childcare for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers at Sarah Moore Greene Magnet Academy.

**Interested in hosting a micro-center at your company?**

**Email us at: [education@unitedwayknox.org](mailto:education@unitedwayknox.org)**



## OUR IMPACT IN 2024

- Created **178 high-quality, trauma-informed childcare spots** in Knox County with partners: Boys & Girls Clubs of the Tennessee Valley and Olive Tree Learning Academy
- Sustained the **first innovative micro-center** with the YMCA of East Tennessee
- Partnered with KCS to develop a **Preschool Strategic Plan** to drive future growth



## TUTORING AND EARLY LITERACY SUPPORTS TENNESSEE ALL CORPS

Third grade reading proficiency scores are a marker for future academic success. Children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are **four times less likely to graduate** from high school. Currently, **less than 40%** of Knoxville-Knox County third grade students are performing 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.

With many students falling behind, we are working to ensure all kids have access to learning supports outside of the classroom. We secured **over \$1.5 million** in the State of Tennessee's Department of Education grant funding for the YMCA of East Tennessee, Boys & Girls Clubs, Wesley House, and Shades of Development to provide tutoring programs designed to support KCS students who need extra help to succeed academically. With our high-impact tutoring program, students receive focused instruction three days per week in small groups from a consistent tutor.

### OUR IMPACT IN 2024

- Employed **115 trained tutors**
- Completed over **8,000 hours** of tutoring
- Helped over **790 students**
- Supported **36 tutoring sites**
- Served **five counties** (Anderson, Blount, Claiborne, Knox, and Loudon counties)



Support our Tutoring Programs.



## STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH EARLY LEARNING STAKEHOLDERS KNOX AREA AFTERSCHOOL NETWORK

We are working to build a strong foundation of support for young children through partnerships on the local, state, and national levels. Locally, we are collaborating to align early care providers through the Knox Area Afterschool Network (KAAN). UWGK has been leading KAAN for over 10 years. The program was developed to create a space for after school professionals to network and grow. **Over 50 after school professionals** meet monthly to connect, collaborate, and access new resources and partnerships for their programs.

We also helped develop the Early Care and Education Coalition, aligning childcare organizations under one group. By creating alignment in our community, we are improving school attendance, developing higher quality, diverse childcare offerings, reducing duplication of services, and creating an overall better stewardship of resources.

### OUR IMPACT IN 2024

- Brought together **352 after school professionals**
- Connected with **39 after school programs**
- Served **69 schools**
- Offered **18 hours** of professional development



Discover how you can  
support this network.



## EMPOWERING NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

In 2023, Community Schools joined UWGK to create greater opportunities for community impact. Through this initiative, we are developing support “hubs” across neighborhoods in Knox County. This strategy transforms a school into a community space where educators, local community members, families, and children unite to access resources and build a brighter future.

By stationing full-time coordinators at each Community School, we ensure services reach people and make a meaningful difference where it matters most. Our team has successfully collected data to understand where our community’s most pressing needs exist. We have supported children, families, and neighborhoods by creating enrichment opportunities, hosting community events, providing free meals, gathering resources for teachers and schools, and more.

### OUR IMPACT IN 2024

- Supported over **6,400 students**
- Employed **16 full-time coordinators** on site at schools
- Leveraged **\$1,176,864** of in-kind donations
- Connected **3,142 students** with additional resources to eliminate barriers to learning
- Served **2,400 meals** to families across **16 engagement events**



Learn more about  
Community Schools.





# STORIES OF IMPACT

## DEVELOPING ACCESSIBLE CHILDCARE PROGRAMS FOR UNDERSERVED FAMILIES

As a UWGK funded organization, the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Tennessee Valley are making significant strides in improving access to high-quality early childhood education. By offering affordable preschool after school programs at **seven schools**, they have alleviated financial burdens for families in the Knoxville area, ensuring that children, especially from economically disadvantaged households, receive the foundational education and care they need.

The program's impact is reflected in impressive outcomes: **90%** of preschool members maintained regular attendance, **91%** could correctly pronounce letter sounds, and **87%** were proficient in identifying letter names. These metrics are a testament to the program's effectiveness in preparing children for their educational journey.

Beyond academics, the program has also connected families with vital resources, including mental health services, food supplies, and educational materials. This holistic approach ensures that both children and their families are supported, creating a strong foundation for future success.



# CREATING HIGH-QUALITY, TRAUMA-INFORMED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

UWGK provided funding to launch the Olive Tree Learning Academy. The goal was to create more high-quality, trauma-informed early childhood education opportunities. The program focuses on the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children aged six weeks to five years. With a commitment to serving low-income families, **69%** of the academy's students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and **48%** are from single-parent households.

Olive Tree goes beyond traditional early childhood education. Families have access to a wide range of services, including mental health counseling, parent coaching, and economic mobility mentoring. The academy also provides nutritious meals and educational support and engages children in growing fresh vegetables.

One parent said, "This is by far the best early learning center I have had my girls enrolled in. The teachers are amazing and so are the directors. As the parent of a neurodiverse child, this mom had struggled to find long-term childcare. This family found a supportive environment that provided the specialized care they needed.





# COMMUNITY INVESTMENTS

UWGK is committed to supporting other area nonprofits by providing resources and funding. Our community investment funding is dedicated to amplifying the transformative work other nonprofits are doing in health, early care and education, and economic mobility.

In 2024, our dedicated community of donors empowered **53 organizations** to create lasting change across East Tennessee. Through the generous contributions to the Education Impact Grants program, we were able to distribute **\$1,255,000** to organizations that are deeply committed to transforming lives and building stronger, more resilient communities.

## 2024 Early Care and Education Grant Recipients

- A 1 Learning Connections
- ARC Knox County
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of East Tennessee
- BLOC Knoxville
- The Bottom
- Boys & Girls Clubs of the Tennessee Valley
- Bridge Refugee Services, Inc.
- Camp Koinonia Foundation Inc.
- CASA of East Tennessee
- Catholic Charities of East Tennessee
- Centro Hispano de East Tennessee
- Childhelp
- Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Knox County
- East Tennessee Freedom Schools
- Emerald Youth Foundation
- Emory Valley Center
- The Florence Crittenton Agency
- For the Love of Reading
- Fostering Hope
- Friends of Literacy
- Friends of Tennessee's Babies with Special Needs
- Girl Talk, Inc.
- Girls Inc. of Tennessee Valley
- Girls on the Run of Greater Knoxville, Inc.
- Harmony Family Center
- Helen Ross McNabb Center
- Helping Mamas Knoxville
- Karate Five Association, Inc.
- Knox County Community Gardens and Growers Alliance
- Knox Pride
- Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee
- Knoxville Area Urban League
- Knoxville Leadership Foundation
- Lakeway CASA
- Little Oaks Academy
- Metro Drug Coalition
- Muse Knoxville
- My Daughters Journey, Inc.
- Next Step Initiative
- Olive Tree Early Learning Academy
- Rooted East
- The Salvation Army A Georgia Corporation
- SHADES of Development
- Shora Foundation
- Susannah's House
- Thrive Lonsdale
- Two Bikes
- Widowed Parent Relief Project
- Women With Vision
- YMCA of East Tennessee
- YOKE Youth Ministries
- Youth Outreach in Science Technology Engineering and Math
- YWCA Knoxville and the Tennessee Valley

# EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

# THROUGH IMPACTFUL GRANTS

**Centro Hispano de East Tennessee** received funding through our community investment grants that allowed them to expand their Youth and Family Engagement program. With this support, they were able to reach **over 600 clients** in 2023. Families found crucial support through the program. One participant, Jenifer, joined shortly after moving to the area. She was able to access resources that helped her family integrate and thrive. The program helped her build strong community bonds fostering inclusivity for herself and her family.



**Big Brothers Big Sisters of East Tennessee** used UWGK's community investment funding to match hundreds of children with mentors to provide guidance and friendship. The program served **405 children** in the past year. With **179 children** identifying as Black or African American, the organization is successfully supporting diverse communities and underserved families. Many children and their mentors have developed a life-changing bond through the program, creating a lasting impact.



**Boys & Girls Clubs of the Tennessee Valley** also made remarkable strides, using their community investment grant to support **over 2,300 children** in the region. These funds enabled them to provide safe spaces, educational support, and character-building activities. These clubs offer positive environments for children to grow and excel, playing a crucial role in shaping the next generation.



## UNITED, we are building thriving communities.

Each of these stories, and many more, are a testament to the power of collective giving. The grants awarded in support of early care and education did not just provide financial support; they fueled hope, opportunity, and transformation for individuals and families across our region.



See our full list of funded partners.

# NEXT STEPS

As UWGK continues advancing early care and education opportunities in Knoxville-Knox County, our next steps involve several key strategies aimed at expanding our reach, ensuring sustainability, and enhancing collaboration.



## SCALING UP SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

By expanding proven initiatives, we can reach more families and providers across the region. We're working to increase the capacity of existing programs and to replicate successful models across our community. When we scale up programs, we help more families access high-quality early care and education, ensuring more children have access to the resources and support they need during critical developmental years.

## SECURING SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

Long-term success requires long-term funding. We are working to identify and secure reliable, consistent funding to help more programs grow. We are exploring diverse funding opportunities, including government grants, private donations, and corporate partnerships. By establishing a stable financial foundation, we can maintain and expand our early care and education initiatives, providing ongoing and lasting support for families.

## STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS

Collaboration is crucial for enhancing the support network of early care and education providers. By deepening connections with existing partners and seeking new partners, we can create a more robust, interconnected support system. This approach will enable us to share resources, knowledge, and best practices, ultimately improving the quality and accessibility of early care and education across the region.

## DEVELOPING A STRONG WORKFORCE

In order to ensure all children have access to high-quality, trauma-informed childcare, we must support childcare professionals. This includes childcare and early education workers, kindergarten through third grade teachers, early interventionists, pediatric mental health professionals, and more. When we enhance support for providers, we enhance support for children.

## SUPPORTING PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN TRANSITIONS

Kindergarten readiness goes beyond knowing letters and numbers. It's about ensuring that every child has the social, emotional, and cognitive skills needed to thrive in school and in life. By focusing on kindergarten readiness, we are building strong foundations for a lifetime of learning and success.

We are working with KCS, providing spaces for collaboration, project management, strategic planning support, research, and state advocacy to help develop a **Preschool Expansion Plan**. The plan will emphasize helping more kids access high-quality preschool and teaching parents about kindergarten readiness benchmarks. The primary area of focus is Region 5 schools. This region includes many of our local Community Schools where students experience higher academic disparities due to economic disadvantages.

## REAL CHANGE HAPPENS WHEN WE

# UNITE

Join our growing network of organizations, businesses, government advocates, and community members working to create a supportive community where everyone can thrive.

**Be part of the solution today!**  
Scan the QR code or visit [uwgk.org/ece](http://uwgk.org/ece)



## OUR MISSION

Uniting people and resources to strengthen communities and solve systemic issues.

## OUR VISION

Creating an equitable community through partnerships, impact, and commitment to transformation.

Presented in part by:



**UNITED WAY**  
Greater Knoxville

(865) 523-9131 • 1301 Hannah Avenue  
Knoxville, TN 37921 • [uwgk.org](http://uwgk.org)