



The Prichard Committee

Building a Groundswell for a Big Bold Future



GREATER OWENSBORO Partnership for Early Development



The Greater Owensboro Partnership for Early Development (GOPED)

Strengthening the Early Care & Education Ecosystem in Greater Owensboro



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December 2025



Dear Friends and Partners,

The Greater Owensboro Partnership for Early Development (GOPED) shows what's possible when local leadership and cross-sector collaboration come together. Families, educators, businesses, health partners, neighborhood groups, civic institutions, and philanthropies united around a shared goal: ensuring every child gets a strong start, and every family has real opportunity.

Owensboro's work exemplifies Kentucky's tradition—citizen-led progress built on relationships, trust, and community imagination. This report shows how the community moved from fragmented early childhood efforts to a coordinated strategy centered on Advocacy, Access, and Quality. Through sustained local investment, the leadership of the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro, and partnerships across schools, Head Start, child care providers, higher education, nonprofits, employers, and families, Owensboro built a stronger early childhood system that reaches deeply into neighborhoods and strengthens the workforce behind the workforce.

What's most inspiring is the method: solutions designed by, with, and for the people they serve. When families shape messaging, educators co-create training pathways, employers see child care as essential infrastructure, and neighbors gather around early learning spaces; a new kind of system takes hold—one rooted in shared purpose, not obligation.

As GOPED transitions to its next phase, Owensboro is ready to evolve into a formal early childhood coalition, ensuring this work endures beyond any single project or grant. The community is poised to carry forward its innovation, data systems, shared leadership, and culture of mobilization.

Kentucky's future depends on strong communities, and Owensboro is lighting the path forward. Together, we can build systems that outlast us, expand opportunities for families, and strengthen our Commonwealth for generations.

With gratitude,

Brigitte Blom
President & CEO
The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence



Executive Summary

Greater Owensboro has long been defined by collaboration and community leadership. The Greater Owensboro Partnership for Early Development (GOPED) carries forward that tradition by uniting schools, families, child care providers, employers, and civic partners to strengthen early childhood development.

Launched in 2021 through a catalytic investment by the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro (PLFO) and in partnership with the Prichard Committee, GOPED transformed early childhood from a fragmented challenge into a coordinated system. PLFO's \$500,000 multi-year investment seeded innovation and was leveraged to build partnerships, expand access, and elevate quality—positioning Owensboro's backbone organizations to carry this work forward.

GOPED was created in response to a critical challenge: half of Owensboro's children entered kindergarten unprepared, and early literacy and numeracy gaps were widening. Community surveys confirmed strong public demand for more affordable, high-quality child care. GOPED responded with a coordinated strategy focused on **Advocacy, Access, and Quality**.

Advocacy

GOPED has elevated early childhood as both an education and economic priority. Initiatives like Parent-Powered/Ready4K have reached more than 1,300 families, and the community-wide "Checkmarks" campaign has increased the visibility of early learning. Owensboro's progress has been featured in two nationally screened films, helping position the city as a leader in early childhood innovation.

Access

In 2021, only 20% of local children under five had access to early learning. GOPED is expanding that capacity through coordinated enrollment in programs such as the Child Care Assistance Program through The Center's Mobile Hub, promoting employer partnerships, and new high-quality seats — including a major YMCA expansion that have added infant and toddler slots, with more preschool slots coming. These efforts reduce cost and information barriers, especially for families historically underserved.

Quality

Recognizing that educators are central to quality, GOPED and its partners are investing in building a robust early childhood workforce pipeline. Promoting apprenticeships for high school career pathway programs and providing needs-driven high quality professional learning opportunities for early educators through the forthcoming YMCA Professional Learning Hub will support credentialing, raise instructional quality, and improve All STARS ratings across providers.

GOPED's work delivered measurable progress aligned with its original goals:

- **Raise awareness and build support:** The **Checkmarks campaign** transformed parks, libraries, and businesses into early learning spaces, while **ParentPowered/Ready4K** reached 1,130 families with over 120,000 early learning messages. Owensboro's story was featured in two nationally screened films, elevating early childhood as a community and economic priority.
- **Strengthen the early childhood workforce:** Workforce pipelines initiated with **youth, educator, and director apprenticeships**, and the YMCA is developing a **Professional Learning Hub** to provide peer coaching and professional learning support.
- **Encourage employer partnerships:** Collaborations with the **Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce** advanced employer-supported child care strategies and promoted Kentucky's Employer Child Care Assistance program.
- **Expand access for working families:** The **Mobile Resource Hub** connected families to CCAP, Head Start, and pre-K at 48 community events, reaching over 1,000 adults and children. The YMCA added **38 new infant/toddler seats**, with a 5,000 sq. ft. Family Child Care & Training Center opening in 2026.
- **Increase program quality:** Providers accessed curriculum alignment and coaching through partnerships with EC Learn and Child Care Aware, supporting higher All STARS ratings.
- **Use data for continuous improvement:** A **Community Data Dashboard** is in development to track enrollment, workforce metrics, and child outcomes, ensuring accountability and guiding future strategies.

PLFO's investment enabled Owensboro to seed the establishment of **data infrastructure, workforce pathways, and collaborative models** that local backbone organizations—such as the YMCA, The Center, and Chamber—are now prepared to sustain. In just five years, Owensboro has transformed early childhood from a fragmented challenge into a shared, community-wide cause. GOPED demonstrates that local leadership — backed by collaboration, data, and sustained momentum — can transform opportunities for children and families while modeling a path forward for communities statewide.

GOPED Outcomes At-A-Glance

A community transformed through collaboration, investment, and innovation

- **30+ cross-sector partnerships created**
Uniting schools, child care providers, higher education, health systems, nonprofits, employers, civic groups, and families into a coordinated early childhood ecosystem.
- **1,130 families enrolled in ParentPowered (Ready4K)**
- **Delivering 120,000+ early learning text messages** in four languages, with **93% of families reporting satisfaction.**
- **48 Community Mobile Resource Hub events** Reaching **1,000+ adults** and **1,000+ children**, distributing **776 books** and **861 resource bags**, and visiting **11 of 12 Neighborhood Alliances.**
- **38 new infant & toddler seats added**
Through Owensboro Family YMCA's expansion, with a new **5,000 sq. ft. Family Child Care & Training Center** opening in 2026.
- **Early childhood workforce pathways launched**
Including **youth, educator, and director apprenticeships**, with **1 high school apprentice placed** and **8 early educators engaged** in a professional network.
- **100+ attendees at Family Fun Saturday**
Supported by extensive community partners and covered by local media.
- **Checkmarks campaign installed across Owensboro**
Transforming parks, libraries, schools, and restaurants into early learning environments with StoryWalks, murals, activity paths, window clings, and family engagement materials.
- **Featured in two nationally screened films**
By New America's Better Life Lab and the Alliance for Early Success.
- **\$500,000 in philanthropic investment**
From the Public Life Foundation, enabling multi-year momentum and system-building.

Checkmarks at The Center!



Checkmarks at Legion Park!

Check out the new StoryWalk, thanks to our friends at the DCPL and Parks Department!





Introduction

Building Kentucky's Future, Starting in Owensboro

Kentucky's prosperity depends on how well it nurtures its youngest children. Research confirms that access to high-quality early care and education (ECE) is one of the strongest predictors of lifelong success—for children, families, and the economy. Yet many families face barriers: limited availability, high costs, and workforce shortages. Nearly half of Kentucky's children enter kindergarten unprepared, particularly in early literacy, numeracy, and self-regulation.

Recent statewide progress—expanded preschool eligibility, scholarships, and apprenticeships—has helped, but real change must begin locally. Communities need coalitions that turn statewide priorities into place-based action.

Owensboro was chosen as a demonstration site because of its collaborative spirit and urgent need: nearly half of local kindergarteners were unprepared, and only one in five children under five had access to formal care. In response, the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro and the Prichard Committee launched the Greater Owensboro Partnership for Early Development (GOPED), uniting schools, child care providers, businesses, health systems, and families around a shared vision: every child ready for school, every family supported.

Through advocacy, access, and quality initiatives, Owensboro has become a model for Kentucky's future—showing how local leadership, data-driven strategies, and community engagement can transform early childhood from a fragmented challenge into a unifying cause.

To confront these challenges, Owensboro built a broad, cross-sector network that includes public schools, Head Start, child care providers, nonprofits, higher education institutions, businesses, and community organizations including:



Partner Organizations

- Public Life Foundation of Owensboro
- Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
- Owensboro Public Schools
- Daviess County Public Schools
- Owensboro Community & Technical College
- Kentucky Wesleyan College
- Brescia University
- Western Kentucky University
- Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce
- Lawrence & Augusta Hager Educational Foundation
- Green River Area Community Foundation
- Owensboro Health
- Owensboro Health Foundation
- Audubon Area Community Services
- Owensboro Family YMCA
- H.L. Neblett Community Center
- United Way of Ohio Valley
- The Center of Owensboro-Daviess County
- Catholic Charities of Owensboro
- CASA of Ohio Valley
- Daviess County Early Childhood Community Council
- HANDS of Daviess County
- Building Stronger Families of Daviess County
- Settle Memorial United Methodist Church Child Care
- Kentucky State Legislature-Representatives Suzanne Miles and DJ Johnson
- Daviess County Maternal Health Council
- Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce Child Care Task Force
- Owensboro Independent Community Schools Initiative



Daviess County Community Schools Initiative This collaborative infrastructure now functions as both a local innovation hub and a model for other communities seeking to align early childhood, workforce, and economic development goals.

Owensboro as a Model for Kentucky's Future

Owensboro demonstrates what is possible when a community galvanizes around a shared vision for young children. Through aligned public and private resources, strong family partnerships, and sustained local leadership, Owensboro shows how Kentucky's statewide goals — access, quality, and workforce strength — can be realized through community-driven implementation. This work reflects a broader statewide aspiration: that every child, in every county, enters school ready to learn, and every family is supported in participating fully in the workforce and civic life.



The Owensboro “Can-Do” Spirit: A Community Plan for Early Childhood Education

Owensboro’s tradition of collaboration made it uniquely positioned to take on early childhood challenges. In 2022, the community committed to strengthening its early learning system so that every child has the strong start they deserve.

Why Early Learning Mattered to Owensboro

The early years shape lifelong outcomes. Yet in 2021, nearly half of Owensboro’s kindergarteners arrived unprepared on local readiness measures — especially in early literacy, early numeracy, and self-regulation — and only a fraction of young children had access to early education. Parents struggled to maintain employment due to limited and costly child care, affecting the community’s overall economic vitality.

The Power of Community Investment

Research shows that every dollar spent on high-quality early education returns more than it costs — by strengthening families, improving school outcomes, and fueling local economies. Owensboro’s citizens recognized that investing in their youngest learners was a powerful investment in the community’s future.

GOPED emerged as a coalition of educators, business leaders, nonprofits, and public agencies committed to charting a new path forward. Over eight months, the group studied local data, listened to families and providers, and examined promising models from other communities. The result was a shared

Six-Point Plan for Action:

- 1. Raise awareness and build support.** Launch a public campaign to show how early learning benefits children, families, businesses, and the local economy.
- 2. Strengthen the early childhood workforce.** Support training, scholarships, and apprenticeships so more educators can enter and stay in the field.
- 3. Encourage employer partnerships.** Work with local businesses to offer on-site or subsidized child care and other family-friendly policies.
- 4. Expand access for working families.** Help all eligible families enroll in CCAP and expand eligibility to more middle-income families.
- 5. Increase program quality.** Support providers in earning higher quality ratings and eliminate waiting lists for preschool and Head Start programs.
- 6. Use data for continuous improvement.** Track progress on kindergarten readiness and third-grade achievement to ensure children are thriving.

This plan aligned closely with Kentucky’s statewide priorities — expanding access, improving quality, and strengthening the early childhood workforce — and provided a concrete roadmap for how a single community could bring the state’s vision to life



Groundswell in Action: From Momentum to Alignment

Over the past five years, Owensboro's early childhood work has evolved from fragmented efforts into a coordinated ecosystem aligned around **Advocacy, Access, and Quality**. Supported by sustained investment from the Public Life Foundation and technical assistance from the Prichard Committee, Owensboro now serves as a flagship "Groundswell Community" for Kentucky—demonstrating how local leadership can translate state-wide priorities into place-based action.

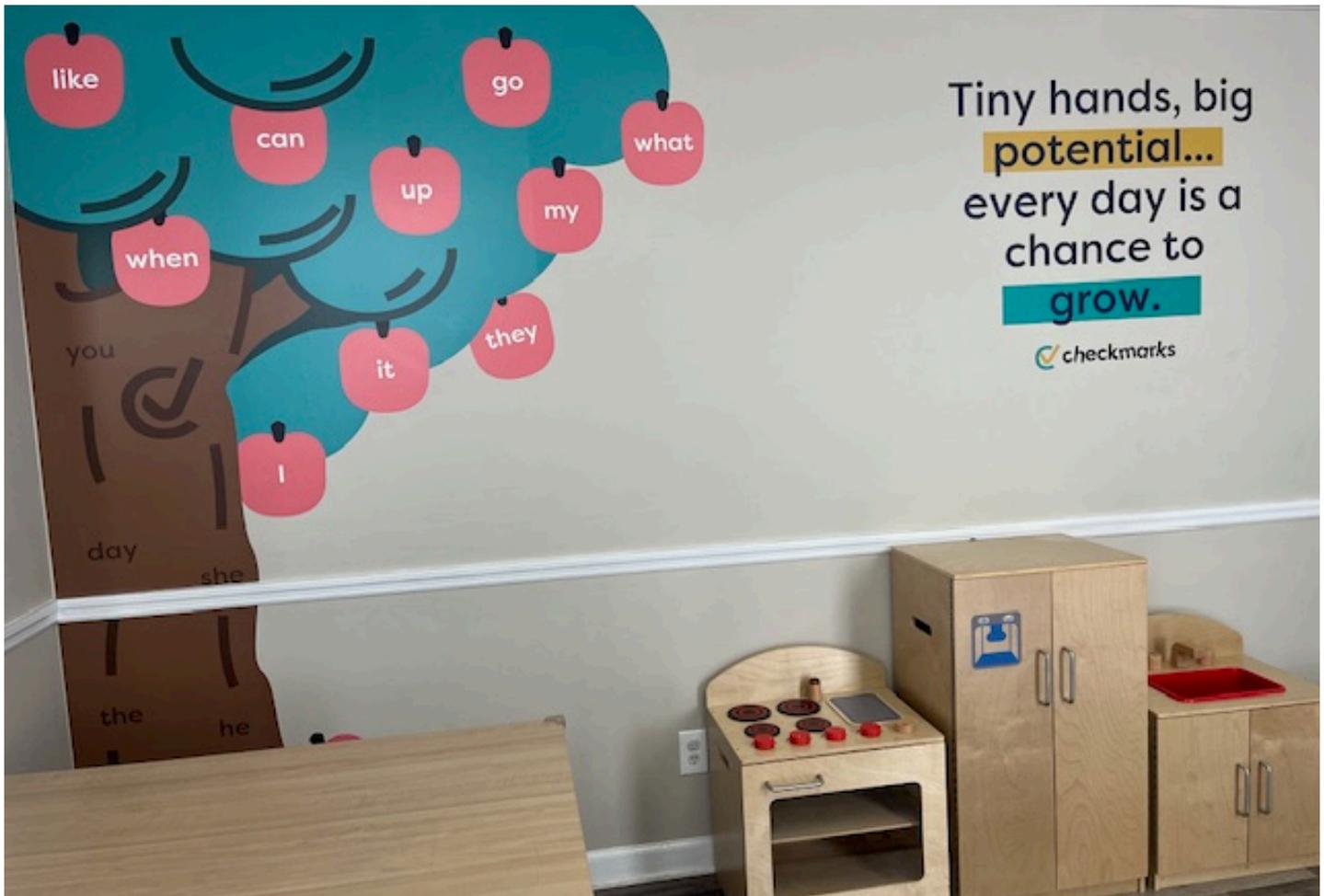
Advocacy: Making Early Learning Visible and Valued

Advocacy has been the anchor of Owensboro's transformation. The **Checkmarks campaign**, launched in 2024 with Kentucky-based branding firm BLDG, created a shared language around five traits of thriving children: **Curious, Healthy, Engaged, Confident, and K-Ready**. These traits complement Kentucky's early learning standards and make developmental priorities accessible to families and community partners.

Checkmarks installations have turned public spaces into learning environments. **StoryWalks** at Legion Park, colorful murals at Moreland Park, and interactive ground games at schools like Hager Preschool invite families to learn through play. Restaurants and libraries display Checkmarks posters, placemats, and activity sheets, reinforcing early learning in everyday settings. The Daviess County Public Library expanded its Baby Book Bundles and curated Checkmarks-aligned reading lists, integrating literacy into family routines.

Community events amplify these efforts. **Family Fun Saturday** drew over 100 attendees to Moreland Park, featuring partners from parks, libraries, safety agencies, and local businesses. Plans for a winter event at the Owensboro Science & History Museum will keep early childhood visible year-round.

Digital engagement complements in-person outreach. **ParentPowered (Ready4K)** delivers early learning tips via text in English, Spanish, Burmese, and Vietnamese to 1,130 families. Surveys show nearly 90% of families find the messages helpful and read them immediately—evidence of strong engagement.



Looking ahead, advocacy will focus on expanding Checkmarks installations, strengthening digital presence, and launching the **Community Data Dashboard** to track enrollment, workforce trends, and quality ratings. This tool will support real-time decision-making and position Owensboro as a policy influencer statewide.

Access: Connecting Families to Opportunities

Where advocacy builds awareness, **Access** ensures families can act on it. Owensboro's approach centers on reducing barriers and creating a seamless system of supports.

The **27-foot Mobile Resource Hub**, developed with The Center of Owensboro–Daviness County, brings enrollment and family services directly into neighborhoods. Equipped with private meeting rooms and outdoor engagement space, the Hub connects families to CCAP, Head Start, district pre-K, and health services while enabling real-time referrals through Unite Us. By late 2025, the Hub had participated in **48 events**, reaching over **1,000 adults and 1,000 children**, distributing **776 books** and **861 resource bags**, and visiting **11 of 12 Neighborhood Alliances**.



Supply expansion is another priority. The Owensboro Family YMCA added **38 infant and toddler slots** and is building a **5,000 sq. ft. Family Child Care & Training Center** to open in 2026. This facility will serve as both a child care site and a professional development hub for apprenticeships and educator training.

Employer engagement reinforces child care as workforce infrastructure. Through partnerships with the Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce and Kentucky's Employer Child Care Assistance program, local businesses are exploring on-site care and subsidies to help parents remain in the workforce.

Future access strategies include expanding Mobile Hub routes, deepening multilingual outreach, and integrating maternal-child health screenings into enrollment events—creating a continuum of connection from first contact to long-term engagement.

Quality: Investing in People and Practice

Quality begins with the workforce. Owensboro is building a **three-tier apprenticeship system** for high school students, early educators, and program directors. The YMCA will serve as the first host site, blending classroom instruction, hands-on experience, and mentorship. Early cohorts include one high school apprentice and eight educators engaged in a professional network.

Professional learning partnerships with EC Learn and Child Care Aware support providers in curriculum alignment and coaching to raise All STARS ratings. Data tools will link quality improvement efforts with enrollment and workforce trends, ensuring resources target the greatest needs.

Quality also extends to family well-being. While plans for a Maternal Health Coordinator were paused due to reimbursement constraints, GOPED pivoted to partnerships with River Valley Behavioral Health and HANDS to integrate mental health and home visitation supports. Future efforts will weave Checkmarks materials, ParentPowered messages, and developmental screenings into a holistic approach for families.

Owensboro's Early Childhood System in Motion

By 2025, Owensboro's early childhood system is more integrated, visible, and community-driven than ever. **Advocacy** builds shared language, **Access** connects families to resources, and **Quality** elevates educators and programs. These elements interact daily—in parks, libraries, schools, and homes—creating a ripple effect of Groundswell action.

As PLFO's five-year investment concludes, Owensboro is poised to codify its lessons into tools other communities can use. The city's legacy is clear: early childhood change is not a single program but a **community operating system** rooted in collaboration, data, and shared purpose. Owensboro demonstrates what is possible when a community acts together—building systems that outlast projects and opportunities that uplift generations.

This is Groundswell in Action.

Barriers to Progress

Despite strong momentum, Owensboro's early childhood ecosystem faces persistent challenges that must be addressed for long-term success.

Systemic Challenges

- **Workforce shortages and low wages:** Early educators earn less than comparable service-sector jobs, making recruitment and retention difficult.
- **Affordability pressures:** Tuition costs rival housing payments, leaving many families unable to afford care even with assistance.
- **Fragmented systems:** Separate eligibility and funding streams create confusion for families and inefficiencies for providers.
- **Uncertain funding:** Temporary state and federal investments are expiring, risking tuition hikes, quality cuts, or closures.

Local Constraints

- **Limited supply:** Only one in five children under age five can access formal care; infant/toddler slots remain scarce.
- **Advocate for sustained state investment.**
- **Capacity strain:** Key partners like YMCA and school districts are stretched thin while expanding services.
- **Language barriers:** Multilingual families still face gaps in interpretation and culturally responsive supports.
- **Emerging data systems:** The Community Data Dashboard is under development, limiting real-time tracking.

Opportunities

- **Stabilize workforce:** Expand apprenticeships, scholarships, and wage supports to retain talent.
- **Strengthen navigation:** Invest in coordinated enrollment and multilingual outreach to simplify access.
- **Leverage shared services:** Use partnerships to reduce administrative burdens and raise quality.
- **Secure long-term funding:** Document local impact to advocate for sustained state investment.

Owensboro's collaborative infrastructure and "can-do" culture provide a strong foundation to overcome these barriers and advance a durable early childhood system.

Next Steps: Propelling Forward – Sustaining Our Progress in Owensboro

Owensboro stands at a pivotal moment. With PLFO's catalytic investment laying the foundation, the community is ready to transition GOPED into a **formal Owensboro Early Childhood Alliance**—a backbone-led coalition that ensures durability and scale.

Key Priorities:

- **Formalize governance:** Create a charter, backbone staffing, and working groups focused on Access, Workforce & Quality, Family Engagement, and Policy.
- **Diversify funding:** Build a multi-year strategy blending philanthropy, employer contributions, and public grants to sustain operations beyond seed funding.
- **Embed the Five Big Shifts:** Move from doing "to" and "for" to doing "with" families; increase local coordination; foster collaborative leadership; prioritize high-impact strategies; and create a ripple effect of Groundswell action.
- **Leverage backbone organizations:** Position YMCA, The Center, and Chamber as engines for workforce development, coordinated enrollment, and employer engagement.
- **Advance data-driven accountability:** Launch the Community Data Dashboard to track enrollment, workforce metrics, and child outcomes.

By embedding these strategies, Owensboro will transform early childhood work from isolated programs into a **durable, community-led system**—one that builds on PLFO's legacy and ensures long-term impact.

Conclusion

Owensboro's early childhood movement began with a bold idea and a catalytic investment from PLFO. That seed funding sparked innovation, attracted partners, and positioned local backbone organizations to lead the next chapter. Today, Owensboro is ready to formalize this work into a sustainable alliance—anchored in collaboration, data, and equity.

This is more than a local success story; it is a blueprint for Kentucky's future. By building systems that outlast projects and opportunities that uplift generations, Owensboro demonstrates what is possible when communities act together—with trust, transparency, and shared purpose.

