CREATING LIFELONG LEARNERS, ONE CHILD AT A TIME
“From tiny seeds grow mighty trees.” (Unknown) As we have and continue to face a world health crisis that has impacted nearly every aspect of our daily lives, Early Connections has aimed to focus on the “tiny seeds” in our community. Our children remain our primary concern because it is only from them that our “mighty trees” of the future will grow.

Over this past year, Early Connections has recognized our community’s children must be nurtured. To do so, we have focused on their health and well-being, support of their families, and innovative community relationships and collaborations. We would like to thank our dedicated partners and supporters, and we want to recognize the dedication and selflessness our teachers and many other staff have shown throughout this time. Early Connections remains committed to face any future obstacles as a community, just as we have this past year.

In summary, we are pleased to present our 2019-2020 annual report highlighting Early Connections’ work throughout this challenging time.

Finally, Early Connections would be remiss without recognizing the retirement of our Executive Director, Darlene Kovacs, and thanking her for many years of nurturing Early Connections’ tiny seeds. Please be assured that Early Connections is entering the next year and those thereafter optimistic, energized, and eager to expand our organization, the services it offers, and the impact it has on our community. Together, we grow.

JAMIE SCHUMACHER
BOARD PRESIDENT
What a year this has been! Certainly no one expected to experience a pandemic and, although we had Pandemic Procedures in place, we had not anticipated all the details that we needed to consider. Throughout the shutdown, staff from Administration and our Centers continued to work behind the scenes to ensure that we could welcome back Early Connections children and families as soon as possible.

We were thrilled when May 11th finally came, and we could open our doors and resume providing children with the best, most engaging learning activities and loving care. Directors and teachers were so excited to be back at the work that they love – and they made sure that every measure was taken so that your children were in the healthiest possible environment. We will continue to follow all the recommendations of the CDC and Department of Health so that children, families, and staff stay well!

So many things happened before we were even aware of COVID that I want to recall a few of the highlights and share them with you. Our North East center expanded to the point where a second classroom was needed, and in partnership with the North East School District, the new classroom was successfully opened. City Center’s playground was greatly improved by the addition of a new vinyl fence and deck, increasing safety and security and providing a dry surface for our youngest learners to play outdoors. City Center’s staff helped out at the Millcreek Mall’s Elmo event, giving families a chance to enjoy a Mall outing together. Union City experienced field trips that connected children with their community helpers, and they enjoyed a tour of the local Tops grocery store. Families came together to do a wind activity on UC’s Family Engagement Night.

All centers benefited from a NAP SACC grant, providing funds to help us focus on children’s physical activity, socialization, and enjoyment of nutritious food. The Infant Toddler Contracted Slots grant funded some of our youngest learners to enroll in Early Connections’ programs at no cost to their families, helping them to grow and develop, and eventually to enroll in PreK Counts.

Two fundraisers were real FUNdraisers! Nonprofit Night at the Bayhawks turned out to be a snowy night at the Bayhawks, but many families attended and enjoyed watching the game. Our first ever Taco Wars event brought in people from all over the community to taste an amazing variety of taco offerings from several local restaurants – and to vote for their favorite.

As you can see, COVID was only a fraction of our story – there was so much more! As Early Connections looks forward, we will keep the excitement happening every day so that children want to learn!
Early Connections has a long history of providing programs and services within Erie County, first as the YWCA of Erie and then as Early Connections after disaffiliating with the National YWCA in 2004. In the beginning the YWCA primarily focused on providing housing, education, and employment services for young women living in the Home for Girls. As the years went by programs were added to give young women a place to socialize, learn new skills, and have access to a recreational activities like swimming and bowling.

In the early 1960s the YWCA expanded into Millcreek with the construction of a large building to accommodate its expanding fitness and recreational programs for women and their families. Ten years later the YWCA opened the Children’ Center in downtown Erie to meet the growing need for child care services. Soon after, child care services were added to the Millcreek location. The 1990s began a rapid period of growth for the agency as child care services continued to expand to include a licensed kindergarten and before/after school care programs, and additional locations were opened to better serve the Erie community. The organization also provided youth programs at local community centers, as well as at City of Erie parks during the summer months.

In early 2004, the YWCA of Erie disaffiliated from the national YWCA in order to clearly focus on working with children and their families with an emphasis on children from birth through age eight. Upon disaffiliation, the YWCA of Erie changed the organization’s name to Early Connections and continued to focus on developing programs and services that address unmet needs in our community. During the next decade partnerships were formed with many agencies, which resulted in several new ventures: Study Circles diversity training, Tech Girls, SmartStart parenting program, becoming the lead agency for United Way of Erie County's Success By 6 initiative, Erie's Future Fund, and Family Support, just to name a few. Early Connections was also chosen to help facilitate the work of the NW Regional Key, using our skills at collaboration to help bring a variety of stakeholders together to address the needs of early care and education services in our part of the state.

Today our organization continues to live out its mission to demonstrate leadership and innovation in the field of early care and education with services, expertise, advocacy, and partnerships that promote developmentally appropriate practices for children.
Early Care and Education (ECE): Quality early care and education (ECE) is provided for children at three urban sites in the city of Erie, one in Union City, and one in North East. This includes preschool programming, child care, and before-and-after school care, with each site individualizing its offerings and hours to meet the needs of the families it serves. We serve 500+ children ages birth to 12 years old at our centers during the course of a year.

Early Connections locations feature:
- PA Dept. of Human Services Licensure
- Participation in Keystone STARS at a STAR 3 or 4 level
- Use of Creative Curriculum for infants, toddlers and preschool in every classroom
- Meals and snacks
- Family participation
- Secure building entry systems
- Acceptance of Child Care Works (CCW) subsidized child care payments

Pre-K Counts (PKC) provides quality half-day and full-day pre-kindergarten to eligible 3 and 4 year old children in Pennsylvania. This state-funded Pre-K program is designed for children who are between age 3 and younger than the age for entry into kindergarten, are at risk of school failure, and living in families earning up to 300 percent of the federal income poverty level (such as a family of four earning $78,600).

- Pre-K Counts offered at all Early Connections locations plus 1 classroom in partnership with Iroquois Elementary School.
- Full and half day sessions available
- 223 children participated in PKC classes during the 2019-2020 school year

Infant Toddler Contracted Slots

The Infant Toddler Contracted Slots Program builds upon the already established infrastructure of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts (PKC) Program model. Building an infant toddler focused program with established PKC programs will allow continued focus on quality programming while building strong transitions from infant-toddler to pre-kindergarten classrooms.

- 4 of our 5 Early Connections locations accept ITCS funded enrollments
- Provides free full and part time care for Child Care Works eligible infants and toddlers
FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAM

The goal of the Family Support Program is to provide quality early care and education to the children while helping the caregivers access resources to support their family. In the 2019-2020 fiscal year, the Family Support Program supported roughly 24 children from 15 families.

During shutdown, the Case Manager shared information, resources, referrals, and checked in with each Family Support family.

This program is funded through a contract with Erie County Department of Human Services (DHS).

*When the Smith family was referred to the Family Support program, Allison was living in a shelter with her mom. They both faced an uncertain future together as a family. Because Allison was enrolled at Early Connections, mom was assured that her daughter was in a safe, high-quality environment during the day. Mom was able to use the time Allison was in child care to focus on improving her family’s situation. Through the assistance of our Family Support program and in collaboration with other service providers in the area, the family received the support to access local resources. Family Support was able to arrange Allison’s transportation around so that mom could attend her GED classes on time while her daughter was at school, learning and growing. Months later, mom and her little girl moved into a home of their own and look forward to a brighter future together.

*The family and child’s name were changed to protect their identity.

COMMUNITY REACH AND READ

Community Reach and Read gives our young children a foundation for success by incorporating literature into their lives, read by their own Erie community members. Community volunteers come in to read and do activities using rich, fun-filled literacy that connect to our curriculum and may cover the area of their community careers.

We have had a wide range of community readers, representing many different professions and areas of our community. This is a continuous program that has repeat community visitors as well. We had to temporarily suspend this program due to Covid-19, but are looking forward to when we are able to resume having guest readers again.

Behavior Support Consultant

The position of the Behavior Support Consultant (March 2019-2020) provided additional classroom support for students through a team referral process. Through extensive observation and collaboration with teachers, activities and supports were designed using each child’s strengths, in order to remediate their areas of weakness.

The overall goal was to help these students work toward more independent success within the classroom, as well as outside of the classroom.
United Way
SUCCESS BY 6
Administered by Early Connections

Success By 6™ works to coordinate the efforts of local partners to positively promote early childhood development, education and health across Erie County—resulting in Kindergarten Readiness. Professionals from a wide range of organizations come together through several Success By 6 committees as well as in partnership with the Erie County Local Inter-agency Council (LICC) to focus on the needs of young children and their families.

Success By 6 supports the work of Raising Readers in Erie County by actively participating in the School Readiness and Summer Learning Slide Subcommittees. The goal of the School Readiness Subcommittee is to increase the percentage of children who register on-time for Kindergarten. In the early years of Success By 6 over 17 years ago, the initiative created a Kindergarten Registration flyer which included all of the school district dates for Kindergarten Registration. This flyer is still being utilized today by Raising Readers.

Here are some of the year’s highlights:

- Distributed 2,925+ Kindergarten Registration Flyers to community partners via Success By 6
- Aided in the planning, assembly and packing of 500 Kindergarten Readiness Toolkits
- Distributed 500 United Way of Erie County Dolly Parton Imagination Library flyers to partners and during outreach events to help increase the number of books available to Erie County children
- With the assistance of our community partners the Children Do Come With Directions booklet was revised for 2019-2020. The booklet is available electronically at www.earlyconnectionserie.org.
- Assisted with intakes and the management of the Facebook page for the Kinship Caregivers Network (KCN) of Erie County, helping families connect with the resources they need to support their kinship caregiving efforts.

Erie’s Future Fund is a preschool scholarship program that provides children from low-income families with access to high quality early care and education programs in Erie County.

- The 2019-2020 School Year marked the 8th year of programming
- 49 children received preschool scholarships for 5 half-days per week
- 26 children received scholarships for 3 half-days per week
- 40+ high-quality early care and education program location accept Erie’s Future Fund scholarships
- Scholarships are funded from within Erie County through individual donations, Pre-K Earned Income Tax Credits, and cause-related marketing. This is the 2nd year of United Way of Erie County provided special funding for Erie’s Future Fund children residing in Community School Catchment Areas. 34 children were provided scholarships at 5 half days per week and 9 children were provided scholarships at 3 half days per week.

**ERIE’S FREE TAXES**

Early Connections provides community outreach to rural areas in Erie County on behalf of United Way Erie FREE Taxes. This program assists eligible low to moderate income wage earners claim the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a cash refund, by providing them with free tax preparation and filing services at volunteer tax sites.

- 10,173 brochures and 1370 bookmarks were distributed throughout Erie County for the 2019 tax filing season
EARLY CONNECTIONS

Each day, children from infancy through school age enter our doors, looking forward to seeing their friends – other children, as well as staff who provide for their learning, care and safety. The adults who accept this enormous responsibility do it from their hearts. Their commitment and love for the children is obvious in the finework that they do, and in their boundless creativity and dedication. Early Connections is grateful every day for the directors, teachers, and staff who spend hours each day providing the highest quality of care for the children in our programs.

SHE IS LEARNING SO MUCH AND IS SO EXCITED TO ATTEND EVERYDAY.

I am extremely pleased with the Early Connections program. My daughter has significantly grown in the short amount of time she has been there. I am very grateful that she is able to be a part of this! Thank you so much!

-Krystle S

MY HUSBAND AND I HAVE BEEN THRILLED WITH EARLY CONNECTIONS.

Our 3 year old started attending the Pre-K counts program in North East this year and has learned so much. He’s pointing our letters on signs and packages. Recognizing numbers easily, perhaps most importantly, has started to really form connections with his peers. His teacher is a wonderful educator. She’s accessible, she’s kind, and she has a great amount of knowledge around early childhood education. We’ve been so happy with Early Connections North East we started sending our infant to the city center site when my maternity leave ended. The teachers are so kind. I get to visit with the baby everyday because I go and nurse him on my lunch break and all of the infants seem so happy and well cared for. I really can’t say enough about how wonderful Early Connections is and how impactful it has been for my family. Prior to starting at Early Connections the care we could afford was not great and it’s horrible to be put in a position where you are worried for your children’s well being because you can’t afford anything else. Thank you!

-Alivia H.

THE BEST PART OF MY DAY IS PUTTING A SMILE ON A CHILD’S FACE AND MAKING SURE THEY KNOW THAT THEY ARE LOVED AND CARED FOR.

I chose a profession in Early Childhood because I love children! A motto that sticks out to me is that every child should belong and be loved. If I can be that person that makes an impact on just one child then I have done my job. Children don’t always get dealt the best hand, but they deserve the world. I love when a child comes up to me and asks ‘will you play with me?’ Of course I will! The best part of my day is putting a smile on a child’s face and making sure they know that they are loved and cared for. Teaching the lives of children is so very important because they are the future!

-Rachel Hansrote

AS A TEACHER, I LEARN FROM MY STUDENTS EVERY DAY.

Early childhood education is an important piece of the puzzle in a child’s development. It takes a certain kind of energy and patience to teach in the early childhood field. This is going to be my 11th year teaching Pre-K Counts. The excitement for learning is something special in our classroom. As a teacher, I learn from my students every day. I love finding those little moments of success in each student that really make a difference. Early childhood education builds the foundation for learning, and I am proud to be part of the building blocks to ensure opportunity for all my students.

-Amanda Biebel

EARLY CONNECTIONS IS A GREAT DAYCARE. MY SON HAS GONE HERE SINCE HE WAS 3 MONTHS OLD AND HE IS NOW 4 YEARS OLD.

The staff at Early Connections are very caring, helping and respectful people. My son learns something new every day and that is an important aspect to me. I love all of the different projects they use to teach different topics. Also, Maggie the director is an all around outstanding person. She’s like a mother figure when my child is away from home. Maggie is very down to earth and easy to work. I would choose Early Connections time and again. Thank you!

-Stephanie H.

I LIKE KNOWING EACH DAY I WALK INTO WORK, THAT SOMETHING NEW AWAITS ME AT MY CLASSROOM DOOR.

When I first started my career working with children, I was with teens ages 12-17. I worked there for several years and felt like something was missing, like I wasn’t making the difference in their lives like I needed to. I then was a TSS worker for 7 years and worked with children, of all ages, on the spectrum. I learned a lot from that job, but again felt as though something was missing. I began working at Early Connections 4 years ago. I have been a preschool teacher, school age teacher, and now a Pre-K Counts teacher. In my four years there, I have found my missing piece. Everyday is NEVER the same. I like knowing each day I walk into work, that something new awaits me at my classroom door. I love seeing my children write their names with no help for the first time. I love hearing their stories at Shine Time, about nothing that pertains to the topic I asked! My missing piece was being in a classroom with 3-5 year old children. I wish I could put into words how much they have taught me, but the hug on my leg or the smile on their faces, lets me know it’s reciprocated. Proud to be a Pre-K Counts teacher.

-Miss Carissa
We are focused on the future and moving forward to fulfill our mission by helping young children and families find success. As a result, we collaborate with many organizations throughout Erie County, including:

**POP POP’S FOOD PANTRY**

For the past three years, Early Connections City Center has partnered with Second Harvest Food Bank to offer Food Pantry services to children and families who, for many reasons, are unable to access other Food Pantries in our community. During the 2019-2020 year, 115 bags of food were distributed. Our Pantry was closed in March and April. In May due to the pandemic, we were able to expand our reach and serve families from our Housing Authority locations. Some pantry bags were delivered to our children's homes. Seventeen families were served, including 19 adults and 48 children. We are very thankful to Second Harvest for their partnership!

**EARLY CONNECTIONS, MERCY CENTER FOR WOMEN AND EUMA**

A family’s stress associated with the need for food and permanent shelter often leaves children lacking access to consistent, quality early childhood education, and can hinder the child’s success in kindergarten and school. Early Connections believes that our children are our community's future, and need to be connected to services that improve their potential to succeed. Early Connections continues with the Erie United Methodist Alliance (EUMA) and the Mercy Center for Women to help homeless or transient families provide their children with access to quality early care and education, assisting the family to enroll their children at any of our quality locations. While attending, the children are provided with nutritious snacks and meals, along with quality early care and education. Early Connections staff will also help with kindergarten enrollment, if needed, providing an easier transition into kindergarten. Early Connections is thankful for all of the work that EUMA and the Mercy Center for Women provide to our community!

**EARLY CONNECTIONS AND NAMI**

For the fourth year, 50 preschoolers from Early Connections enjoyed a morning of music and creative activities, while helping NAMI (The National Alliance on Mental Illness) of Erie County to reach out to children and their families to promote stress management and mental awareness to children through music. Award-winning songwriter Lori Burke performed for the children for an hour. The children enjoyed singing, dancing, and interacting with Lori! This project was spearheaded by NAMI of Erie County and occurred through a partnership between NAMI, Erie Arts and Culture, and Early Connections. Support for the program was provided by an Erie Arts & Culture Project Grant, community contributions to the Combined Arts & Cultural Campaign, and the Erie Arts Endowment. Our children and staff are thankful for a wonderful opportunity!
EARLY CONNECTIONS

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW
JULY 1, 2019 - JUNE 30, 2020

REVENUE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revenue for Year Ended 6/30/20</th>
<th>2020 Revenue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contribution and Tax Credit Program</td>
<td>312,225.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Events</td>
<td>65,384.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Way Appropriation</td>
<td>23,298.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Grants</td>
<td>160,261.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding from Community Agencies</td>
<td>62,818.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Service Fees</td>
<td>110,820.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Food Programs</td>
<td>129,286.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3,277.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Revenue</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,453,088.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EXPENSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2020 Audited Expenses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West Side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JE Horan Apartments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Union City Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harbor Homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North East</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hoopla Child Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Ridge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Management &amp; General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erie's Future Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>Success By 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>OY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Expenses</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ACCREDITED UNDER THE PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS’ STANDARDS FOR EXCELLENCE

Early Connections is proud to be able to display this Seal of Excellence awarded by the Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations. PANO evaluates fundamental values such as honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, trust, responsibility, and accountability, all of which are inherently important in the nonprofit world. Early Connections’ management, financial and fundraising practices, and programs and services were subjected to in-depth examination prior to earning accreditation. Learn more about the Standards for Excellence® Program at http://www.pano.org/Standards-For-Excellence/

EARLY CONNECTIONS IS A 501(C)3 NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

Contributions are tax deductible to the fullest extent permitted by law. The official registration and financial information of Early Connections may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.
Early Connections is thankful for the generosity of our partners......

Quite simply, our work would not be possible without the support of the community. The following individuals and organizations made contributions to support the work of Early Connections. Each gift directly and positively affected a child's life. Thank you!

4 N.I.N.E.
Hooked on Books
Columbus Foundation (Big Lots)
Kiwanis Club of Erie
Dr. Paul and Darlene Kovacs
Erie Community Foundation
Erie Community Foundation - Erie Gives Day
Erie Insurance
Plazony Family Foundation
Alicia Pelkowski
Jacqui Catrabone
Jamie Schumacher
John VanTassel
Katie Jones
Michael Plazony
Kevin R. Seeker
Dr. Janet Wojtalik
Lori Hetrick
St. Martins Center
Michael and Pat Visnosky
UA15
LECOM
State Representative Pat and Michelle Harkins
United Way of Southwestern PA
Dickey’s BBQ
United Way of Erie County
MaskErie

We have made every effort to list all contributions and gifts received during the period July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2020. We apologize for any errors or omissions and ask you to contact Early Connections Administrative Offices at 814-874-0144 with corrections.

Erie’s Future Fund
Preschool Scholarship Fund
Administered by Early Connections
American Tinning and Galvanizing
Erie Insurance
Lily Broadcasting of PA LLC
Northwest Savings Bank
UPMC Health Plan

Restricted Donations
Michael and Michele Plazony
MacDonald Illig
UPMC Health Plan
La Nuova Aurora
Britton Family Foundation
AmeriHealth Caritas Services

Early Connections would like to extend a special acknowledgement to 4 N.I.N.E., a North East-based non-profit which assists the local community through a variety of outreach programs and opportunities, including a Thrift Store, GED classes, Food Pantry, Community Center, and many other beneficial initiatives. 4 N.I.N.E. has been a much-appreciated supporter and community partner of Early Connections’ growth in the North East Community in many essential ways.

We ask you to join us as one of our partners—through time, talent, and financial contribution. As with many nonprofits, Early Connections faces financial challenges as we attempt to provide high quality early care and education. We strive to have excellent curriculum, state of the art trainings, and to be able to attract and adequately pay quality staff—none of that can be a reality without financial support from others. Your generosity will make a significant difference for children and their families. Thank you!

QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT:
7-10% ROI

“The rate of return for investment in quality early education for disadvantaged children is 7-10% per annum through better outcomes in education, health, sociability, economic productivity and reduced crime.”

James Heckman
Nobel Laureate in Economics
Our mission: Early Connections supports the success of young children and their families through leadership, advocacy, and quality programs in early care and education.