1 GREAT IDEA = 10 YEARS of quality early care and education for young children
2014 Board of Directors
Board President
Michael Thomas, Esq.
MacDonald, Illig, Jones & Britton LLP
Past Board President
Betsy Bort
Vice President, ERIEBANK
Board Vice President
Bonita Booker
Director, Commonwealth Academic Achievement Program
Gannon University
Board Secretary
Catherine Doyle, Esq.
Erie Family Law
Board Treasurer
Rebecca Dudenhoeffer
Vice President, Total Rewards
Erie Insurance Group
Katie Jones
Community Office Manager,
ERIEBANK Harborcreek
Laura R. Schaaf
Director of Giving
Barber National Institute
Troy Peterson
Vice President, Contact Center Operations
Erie Insurance Group

Administrative Staff
Nancy A. Kalista
Executive Director
Darlene Kovacs
Associate Executive Director
Tracy Robison-Chandler
Vice President of Professional Development
Michelle Harkins
Scholarship Director
Kimberly Beers
Vice President of Outreach /Success By 6
AJ Milanak
Vice President of Finance
Holly Platte
Human Resources Coordinator
Meredith Rodenbaugh
Intake Coordinator
Ready, Set, Grow – Erie!
Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visitation
Jayne Deutsch
Administrative Assistant

Early Care and Education Directors
Courtney Tirak
Early Connections, City Center
Patty Cooney
Early Connections, Union City
Kate Beer
Early Connections, Harbor Homes
Erin Shingledecker
Early Connections, John E. Horan Garden Apartments
Stephanie King
Early Connections, West Side

Mission
Early Connections supports the success of young children and their families through leadership, advocacy, and quality programs in early care and education.

Early Connections is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization—contributions to which are tax deductible to the fullest extent permitted by law.
September 2014

Dear Reader:

Typically this page has a general letter which includes words from the Executive Director and Board President. Staying true to that tradition, this year you will hear from 3 individuals. I will begin the letter by acknowledging an important transition taking place at Early Connections. After 12+ years of being in this position I am retiring at the end of September and moving to Wisconsin with my husband. Acres of woods and a small lake will be our home, staying close to nature and shortening the physical distance to our grandchildren. I leave this organization in very capable hands—Early Connections has a talented and dynamic board of directors, creative and dedicated staff in all areas fulfilling our mission and vision, and a new Executive Director who has a wide scope of experience and who also knows Early Connections very well having worked in leadership roles here for more than five years. Thank you to all who have supported Early Connections and me during my time here. As that one popular saying goes, "Woo Hoo What a Ride!" Now on to the next chapter… continue to enjoy the ride!

Nancy Anne Kalista, departing Executive Director

While change is certainly inevitable, it is very often bittersweet. That is certainly the case with the transition that Early Connections faces as we prepare for Nancy’s retirement. Bitter because Nancy has shaped Early Connections into what it is today. She came to us during a difficult and challenging time for Early Connections. So challenging that Nancy initially served on a temporary basis because the long term viability of the entity was uncertain. Since then, Nancy has transformed Early Connections into a true leader in the field of early childhood care and education and has been recognized statewide and even nationally for her advocacy. Early Connections has served countless children and their families during Nancy’s tenure, and all of us who have the pleasure to know her and work with her have been truly blessed. While Nancy will certainly be missed, she is very much deserving of a long, peaceful retirement, and we wish her the best.

The sweet part of the transition is that the future is very exciting. Nancy is leaving us in extremely good and capable hands, we have a solid financial position, and we have quite a few new programs and partnerships that are in the works. During the Spring of 2014, Darlene Kovacs was selected by the Board to assume the role of Executive Director upon Nancy’s retirement. Darlene was previously serving as our Associate Executive Director. She excelled in this role and was already working very closely with many of our Partners, and this working relationship has only expanded since being selected to replace Nancy. She and Nancy have worked very hard so that Darlene is as prepared as possible going into her new role. We are very fortunate to have had such an extended transition period (although that period seems to have flown by) and the opportunity for Darlene to become integrated in all aspects of Nancy’s day-to-day routine. The feedback that we have received thus far has been tremendous. We are extremely confident that Darlene will make her own mark on the community, as Nancy did, and that Early Connections will keep moving forward as a leader in early childhood care and education. Please join us in welcoming Darlene into her new role. Thank you for your support.

Michael P. Thomas, President of the Board

As this Annual Report is published, we at Early Connections have all had an opportunity to reflect on what has been accomplished, and to feel satisfaction in the work that has been done, especially that which directly supports young learners and their families. Ten years is a landmark anniversary, and in the case of our organization, it is also a time of transition as leadership passes from Nancy Anne Kalista to me.

I have great confidence in what the future will bring for Early Connections! Nancy has been generous with her time and intentional in mentoring me as this transition proceeds. Early Connections’ administrative team, members of our Board, and all of our staff show energy and dedication to the work we do, as well as a genuine caring for the children and families with whom we work. I am grateful for this commitment and focus on the needs of our community; this is what will support our organization through not only times of transition, but well into the future.

In another 10 years, when our 20th Annual Report is released, much will have changed in Erie County. It’s interesting to imagine what our city, our communities, our businesses, and our schools will look like. We can be assured, though, that throughout growth and change over the next decade, Early Connections will remain faithful to its mission, “to support the success of young children and their families through leadership, advocacy, and quality programs in early care and education.” The children in our programs today are the leaders of tomorrow, and continuing to provide them with a high quality early education will lead to their success, and will have a direct impact on the future.

I am grateful to be part of Early Connections, and to look forward to what the future will bring.

Darlene Elsesser Kovacs, Executive Director
Timeline 2004-2014

2004
- Community Engagement Group (CEG) grant awarded
- First Symposium Professional Development Day
- 10 year anniversary
- John E. Horan Garden Apartments

2005
- Northwest Regional Key Partnership
- Success By 6 debuts Faces of Childcare Campaign

2006
- First Legislative Breakfast
- Success By 6 and Early Connections receive PACCA Community Campaign Award
- Leadership Cabinet

2007
- Pennsylvania Pre K Counts
- First Early Childhood Expo sponsored by Success By 6
- Transition Grant Partnership with WQLN Ready, Set, Learn Series

2008
- Harbor Homes
- Early Connections Endowment Fund
- Erie Free Taxes
Receive Economic Development Corp. of Erie County award

Success By 6 hosts first kick-off for Erie County Pin Wheels for Prevention Campaign

2009

2010

Erie Together Partnership
First Early Childhood Education Summit
Receive Keystone Babies Grant

2011

Success By 6 hosts first Collaborative Mentoring Event at Booker T. Washington Center
Participated in School Based Health Care grant process

2012

Erie’s Future Fund
Inclusive classrooms

2013

Ready, Set, Grow - Erie, Early Explorers and All Site Star 4 Partnership with Erie Family centers and host the first Parent Café model event
Early Connections at Union City celebrates 10 year anniversary

2014

Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations (PANO) submitted Bright Star Award Child Development Associate (CDA) Articulation with Gannon University
“While Success By 6 is a national United Way brand, the staff at Early Connections and the other organizations and volunteers involved have truly made it an Erie Region initiative. They have taken great care to identify the early education needs that are unique to this community, and developed and delivered resources to meet those needs. Research supports the long-term value of investing in quality early care, and I am certain that Success By 6 in Erie County is maximizing the return on that investment.”

Bill Jackson, President United Way of Erie County

Approximately 20 years ago a group of concerned child care center directors met to discuss how to make things better for children in Erie County. Those meetings led to the creation of a strategic plan for the entire early care and education system in Erie County, funded by a state grant administered by the Erie Community Foundation and facilitated by Strategy Solutions, Inc. in 2002. The process of developing this plan brought together an unprecedented number of educators, parents, and other concerned individuals to lay the groundwork for the important work that was to follow. At that same time the board of directors at United Way of Erie County identified early education as one of its priority issues, citing the incredible payoffs to communities that invest in a good start for their young people. The national United Way “Success By 6®” model was adopted because of its proven history of positive results, and the existing group that created the county strategic plan became Success By 6 of Erie County! In 2004 Early Connections became the administrator for Success By 6. As the only United Way member agency whose mission coincided exactly with that of Success By 6, and the fact that several of their staff had been critical members of the initiative since its inception, Early Connections was in a unique position to take on this challenge. Beginning with our first symposium in the fall of 2004 which featured nationally-known author and speaker Dr. David Walsh, and continuing through the establishment of committees focused on child abuse and neglect, children with special needs, children’s health care, mental health, and additional education committees, Early Connections has worked hard to establish Success By 6 as a working, results-oriented initiative that is truly improving the lives of children and families in Erie County.
“My support of and affiliation with Early Connections has given me a great deal of pride and satisfaction over these past 10 years. The direct services provided by Early Connections have profoundly enriched not only individual children’s lives, but their families as well. The long lasting benefits are immeasurable.

Early Connections also plays a critically important role in ensuring that child care providers throughout the entire region are properly trained and mentored so families can be assured that their children are thriving in high quality environments. Teaching the teachers has far-reaching implications well beyond even just the doors of Early Connections.”

I salute the work of this Organization as we look forward to the next 10 years!”

Senator Jane Earll
At the end of Erie’s Future Fund’s second school year, we are gratified by the families and children we have reached. To date, we have offered 515 scholarships to children from low-income families throughout Erie County, allowing them to attend over 35 high-quality early childhood education programs. While many of the high-quality programs are located within the city, we also reach out into Millcreek, Corry, Union City, Edinboro, East Springfield, and Albion.

Our families are hard-working families with unique stories. They all recognize the importance of a high-quality early childhood education.

Our families are diverse. They consist of grandparents, a single great-grandmother, single mothers and fathers, veterans, active members in the military, diverse ethnicities, parents with multiple births, children with disabilities, and families who have experienced a life-altering injury or loss of their spouse. Each family has a compelling story and a genuine need for assistance in providing their children with quality early care and education. We assist our families, if needed, throughout the life of their child’s scholarship, even helping with kindergarten enrollment.

Assessment data gathered from our first scholarship year revealed the progress made by our EFF scholars. By the end of the school year, three year-old scholars were in process or proficient in five key learning areas at least 95% of the time. These areas are research-based and essential to help our children succeed in school, graduate, and productively contribute to our community. Four year-old scholars were in process or proficient in the five key learning areas at least 92 percent of the time.

Largely due to the community support for Erie’s Future Fund, more children within Erie County are prepared for success in kindergarten, will be less likely to use special education services and repeat a grade, less likely to become involved in juvenile crime, and will be more likely to graduate on time and enter the skilled workforce. Thank you Erie County, for your continued support!
Ready, Set, Grow – Erie!
Home Visitation Intake Service

In April 2013, as collaboration between the Erie Family Center, Erie County Department of Health, and Union City Family Support Center, Ready, Set, Grow Erie was established. Ready, Set, Grow – Erie is the centralized intake for Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visitation (MIECHV) programs and is administered by Early Connections. Erie County has a number of evidenced-based home visiting programs each with a particular focus and/or prescribed target population.

In the last year, Ready, Set, Grow – Erie has moved from concept into practice. The central intake provides a single referral point of contact for service providers and families. The streamlined referral process has supported referral partnerships with various agencies in the community, as area hospitals, medical providers, mental health providers, case managers, and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) have employed the use of the centralized intake service. Ready, Set, Grow – Erie frequently receives referrals from the area’s largest obstetric and gynecologic practice. In addition, numerous opportunities to reach families directly have been achieved through cooperative relationships with the evidence-based home visiting providers, Success By 6 of Erie County, and other community partners.

The Intake Coordinator completes a screening and determines which evidence-based home visiting program best meets the family’s needs. Of the referrals received by Ready, Set, Grow – Erie, 83% of the families screened were eligible for home visiting services. Referrals to Ready, Set, Grow – Erie came from medical providers (41%), social service agencies (24%), and education providers (20%) – including preschools and child care programs.

Referrals were made to 23 additional community services to address immediate needs or for families not eligible for home visiting services. Through regular contacts with the home visiting programs the intake coordinator is able to quickly connect the family with the most appropriate service. In one instance, the intake coordinator was able to help a pregnant mother experiencing medical complications obtain child care for her two young children. The mother required weekly medical treatments to keep both her and baby healthy. She had no one to care for her children for several hours each week during the treatments. Through Ready, Set, Grow – Erie, this mother not only received her treatments, her children also received quality child care at Early Connections, and she will continue to receive support from a home visitor.

“Through its leadership, Early Connections has been and continues to be a prominent player in meeting the needs of pre-K children and their families. What better way to improve our community than to embrace and nurture its youth. With the introduction of ‘Erie’s Future Fund’ this mission will continue to serve those at-risk children. I am so pleased to have played a very small part in their success. Happy 10th Anniversary! Here’s to your future successes!”

Maryann Yochim, Manager, Governmental Affairs, National Fuel
“Thanks to Early Connections’ ten years of dedication and persistence, our elected officials, business leaders and the general public clearly understand the importance of early childhood education. It is largely through Early Connections’ advocacy, collaboration and excellent programming that Northwest Pennsylvania’s children have ever-increasing access to high quality pre-kindergarten education.”

Dr. Jay D. Badams, Superintendent Erie’s Public Schools

Keystone STARS Technical Assistance

Early Connections continues to provide Keystone STARS Technical Assistance (TA) consulting and Regulatory Referrals from the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), for practitioners in Erie, Warren, Crawford and Venango counties. Research continues to support child care consultation as a method to improve teacher efficacy and positive child outcomes through a multi-faceted one-on-one coaching and mentoring approach for early educators. As a direct result of specialized TA consultation, 34 early learning programs were afforded a total of 572 hours of consultation service and 42% of the programs increased classroom quality that will directly support positive outcomes for children and families by advancing at least one STAR level.

Early Connections strives to support a qualified child care workforce by providing teachers and staff opportunities for personal and professional growth. Four (4) entry-level online Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials have been offered to Pennsylvania child care practitioners this year. Along with offering the online sessions, Early Connections has also secured an articulation agreement with Gannon University that would award participants 9 college credits in the Early Childhood Education Associate Degree matrix, upon successful completion of the CDA assessment process, should they desire to continue their education in the Associates Degree program.

Child care practitioners are also afforded the chance to participate in a conference style day of professional development and offered new this year was a day of professional growth for area School-age practitioners who serve children ages 6-12 along with the day of professional development for all child care practitioners, infant to preschool. This conference style opportunity serves approximately 155 teachers, teacher assistants and aides with quality content sessions relevant to their work.
Early Connections offers Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts classrooms at 4 sites, providing opportunities for young children to experience a high-quality early learning environment. Research shows that a quality early learning experience gives young children a greater opportunity for success in school and throughout life. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, established by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, increases accessibility for young children, especially those considered to be high-risk, to have these high-quality experiences. This opportunity is designed for children who:

- are between age 3 and younger than the entry age for kindergarten;
- live in a family earning up to 300% of poverty; and
- may also have language barriers, a disability or developmental delay, or other issues that make them at risk for failing in school.

Pre-K Counts outcomes continue to show that children enrolled in the initiative are:

- Making outstanding progress throughout their participation in the program;
- Entering kindergarten with appropriate academic and social skills and ready to learn; and
- Continuing to achieve in school through second grade.

Statewide outcomes continue to show amazing results.

- The percent of children with proficient language and literacy skills increased from 22 percent in the fall to 82 percent in the spring.
- The percent of children with proficient mathematical thinking skills increased from 21 percent in the fall to 84 percent in the spring.
- The percent of children with proficient social and emotional skills increased from 33 percent in the fall to 88 percent in the spring.
- The percent of children with proficient scientific thinking skills increased from 23 percent in the fall to 85 percent in the spring.