



Laying the Groundwork for Strong Kids and a Strong Economy During COVID-19 Recovery

Groundwork Ohio was established fifteen years ago with the same fundamental goal we have today--supporting the health and development of Ohio's youngest children and, in turn, supporting their future, their families, and the great State of Ohio. Groundwork has been the voice of children and families through lean and robust state budgets, changing political leadership, and shifting priorities. Through it all, Groundwork has put kids at the center of the debate. And a global pandemic does not change that.

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So... how does the organization that champions high-quality early learning and healthy development strategies from the prenatal period to age five that lay a strong foundation for Ohio kids, families and communities respond and focus its efforts during a global pandemic?

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During the COVID-19 pandemic we are closely following and seeking to influence state and federal action in response to the pandemic where it concerns young children and their families. We are monitoring and evaluating the impacts

of rapid, crisis-response policy change on our youngest and most vulnerable children and those who serve them and will continue to engage our stakeholders to ensure our children's needs are addressed now and during the recovery.

While there are still many more questions than answers, we have learned a lot in the last eight weeks. Based upon the feedback we've received through webinars, virtual convenings and focus groups and surveys from thousands of stakeholders who care for our young children and their families, we know much greater thought must be given to our state's youngest children, who are often the silent victims of any crisis. Their health, safety, and ability to thrive in the future, cannot be secondary considerations to the very real needs of adults. After all, we are in this together.

Given the rich body of research and science that governs our daily work, and in light of these substantial new learnings, we offer the following guiding principles as a lens for all policy decisions that impact young children and their families during this time, as we respond to crisis and rebuild systems to better serve children and families during the recovery.

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As we seek more answers to so many yet-to-be-asked questions about the coronavirus pandemic and our state's long path to recovery, we remain vigilant to these shared values that guide our important work. Groundwork is committed to an Ohio recovery that leaves no one behind by building a stronger foundation for our youngest and most vulnerable children and their families.

Apply the Science of Early Childhood Development

Years of research tells us that the impact of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic can be deep and long-term. The basic principles of neuroscience indicate that early preventive intervention is more efficient and produces more favorable outcomes than remediation later in life. Brains are built by early experiences with 80% of brain development occurring by the age of 3 and 90% by the age of 5. These early experiences, reliant on quality interactions between trusted adult caregivers and young children, will build either a strong or weak foundation for all later development. Accordingly, young children experiencing the trauma of the pandemic during this critical period of development will be impacted by their experiences during this time for the rest of their lives.

The science tells us the prenatal period and the first 1,000 days of a child's life are some of the most critical to brain development. With an 18-month minimum outlook on this virus, many of Ohio's babies will spend over half of these critical first 1,000 days experiencing the uncertainty and challenges brought on by the pandemic. As we advance early learning and healthy development strategies to support all young children during COVID-19, we must ensure that they reflect brain science by meeting the unique needs of pregnant women, infants, toddlers, young children and their families.

Groundwork recognizes that the COVID-19 pandemic requires us to be vigilant with evidence and as such will continue to support policies that are data and research-driven and build on the foundation of the substantial and well-documented body of work on brain and early development.

Focus on Proven Prevention

As the COVID-19 pandemic brings much uncertainty and chaos to many Ohio families, it impacts the physical and emotional health of young children in unique and less understood ways. Some of the impacts, like going without clean diapers or formula or feeling the sting of child abuse, are immediate. Some bring longer-term, but no less detrimental, effects including the loss of strong early learning opportunities, that also may prevent parents from returning to work, and sustained trauma that undermines the social and emotional development of young children necessary for future learning and success. These devastating impacts are preventable with informed, workable policy solutions that support infants, toddlers, preschool children and those who care for them.

Groundwork will continue to support policies that focus on preventing trauma and addressing the needs of children early, to support health development and lifelong success and avoid costly and less-effective interventions later in life.

Tackle Equity Squarely

Race, rural geography, age, gender and physical and intellectual ability, among other social factors, play a determinative role in the gaps that emerge early and persist throughout the lifespan. These gaps emerge earlier than state and federal policy recognize. Our youngest children of color, those living in poverty and in rural communities will be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Just as there must be a commitment to protecting all Ohioans from contracting and ultimately dying from the virus, there must also be a recognition that the economic impact of the pandemic falls disproportionately upon these vulnerable populations of children. Additionally, policy choices, without consideration of equity, regarding the reopening and rebuilding of Ohio's child serving systems could exacerbate both the inequities brought on by the virus and those historically present within our state systems prior to the pandemic.

Groundwork will continue to insist that policymakers and stakeholders alike learn from past practices and use that knowledge to prevent the exacerbation of inequities, and seek to illuminate them.

Demand Accountability through Timely Data

We use data to determine needs, measure outcomes, and evaluate impact. Our ability to quantify loss and measure the progress and impact of policies in real time as a result of COVID-19 is vitally important. Access to crucial data has been limited over time making legitimate policy analysis difficult. Some of the limitations include outdated data systems and limited staff capacity to produce real time analyses. Other limitations include the basic understanding and even lack of commitment to transparency, especially as it concerns marginalized populations. Fast-paced responses required to address COVID-19 will may inhibit our ability to thoughtfully evaluate policy change.

Groundwork will continue to work with policymakers and administrators on reasonable access to available data, use such data to inform policy recommendations, and will seek to quantify and measure success of any policy proposal using disaggregated data.

Provide a Systems Framework

COVID-19 shines a bright light on both the strengths and weaknesses of Ohio's early care and education system. As the state seeks to recover from the inevitable loss of quality capacity in many of its systems serving young children, every opportunity to shore up the foundation of these systems to reopen "better" or "stronger" over the coming months and years must be exercised. This can only be done by taking a multi-disciplinary, cross-sector approach that engages all child-serving agencies and interested stakeholders alike.

Groundwork will strive to put policy solutions into a larger systems framework to better serve our children and families to create the best opportunity for sustainable programs with high quality outcomes.

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