

Making Community Connections to Invest in Early Childhood



Rural Rush County comes together to support its youngest citizens

The coalition began by connecting with stakeholders and collecting data on what already existed in the county. Quality child care was available, but not enough to meet the needs of residents.

“I spent a lot of time getting to know different child care providers and social service organizations,” McCorkle said.

Rush County does not have large child care centers; most are in-home providers. Understanding the challenges they face helped McCorkle serve as a link between existing programs and community organizations.



“We are able to connect providers to resources and best practice opportunities and support them in the really hard job they are doing,”
Jeri McCorkle, Coordinator of Early Childhood Coalition of Rush County

Rush County has its roots as a rural, farming community. That mindset still exists, even as demographics are changing. Residents pride themselves on being self-sufficient.

“Trying to make a community-wide goal and getting everyone to own it has been a challenge,” said McCorkle. “Farmers take care of themselves and their neighbors, but that doesn’t always translate county-wide.”

In the past few years, Rush County has had a very low unemployment rate and at times did not have enough workers to fill open positions. McCorkle is making the case to local companies and philanthropic organizations that supporting early learning is supporting business.

"If you want a stable workforce, families have to have access to stable, high-quality child care," she said.

First5 is invested in the community, and its work is paying off. The availability of child care has increased, with two new providers and added preschool classrooms.

The coalition partnered with all four county preschools on a text-based parent engagement app. All preschool families are enrolled and receive weekly messages of support and tips for meaningful engagement with their children.



First5 has worked with food and clothing pantries and will soon be opening the county's first diaper pantry to provide families with supplemental diapers and wipes.

"When you say early childhood, people think preschool," McCorkle said. "That is one part of it, but we are trying to support our families right from the beginning."

In addition to diapers, families will receive information on safe sleep practices and books for their babies. They can also enroll in First5's parent engagement app.

"If we can connect with families, they will trust us to help them get quality child care, preschool and educational opportunities."

