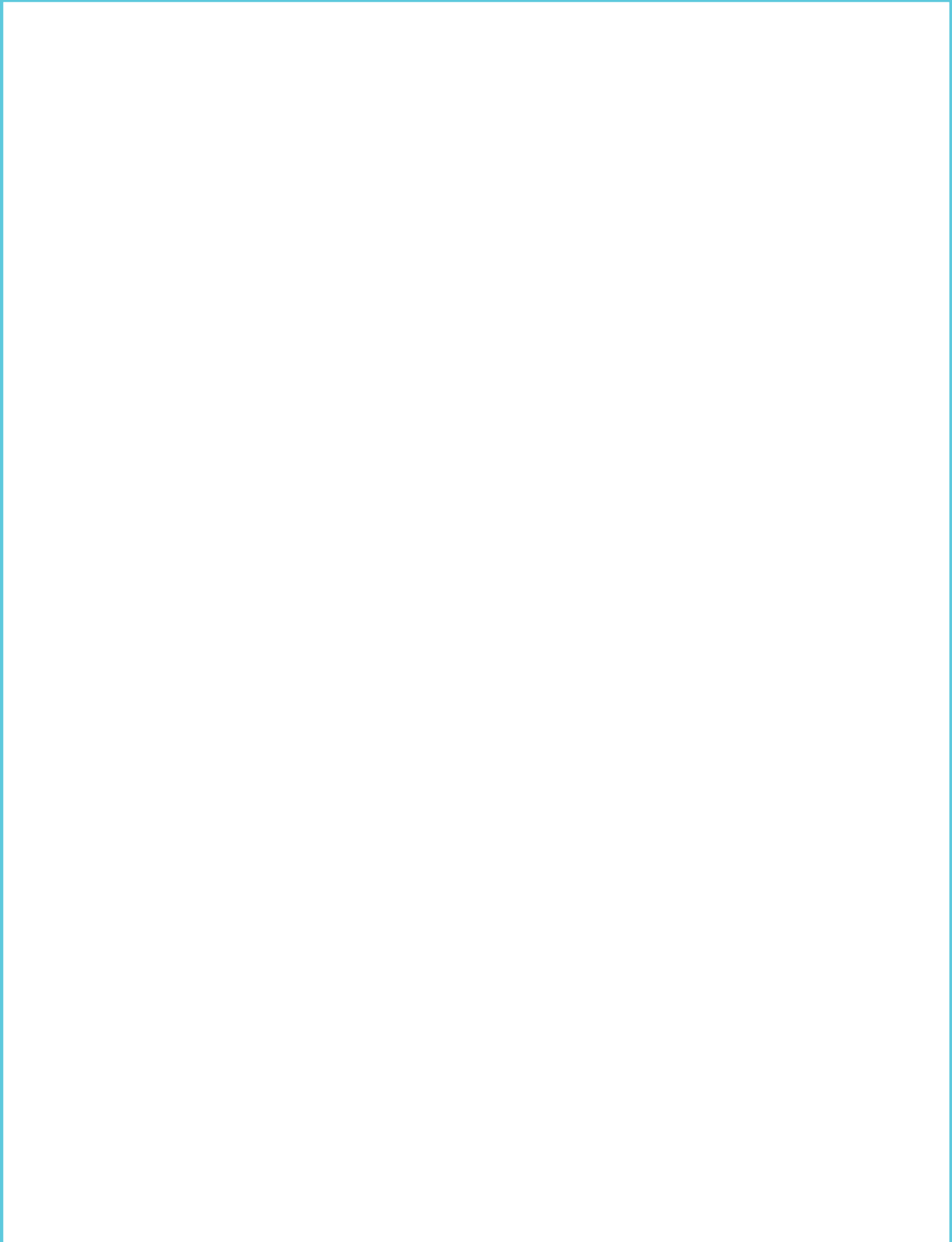




Families as Partners

In Newark's evolving early childhood landscape

Executive Summary



Introduction

Every year, about 4,000 babies are born in Newark, New Jersey, which means there are roughly 12,000 children ages 0-3 in the city right now. It takes a city to raise this many young children well, and Newark has a rich landscape of over 50 major programs and services supporting the healthy development of infants and toddlers.

What is *Families as Partners*?

Families as Partners is a first-of-its-kind research paper from the Newark Trust for Education. It offers an overview of Newark's early childhood development landscape and a preliminary assessment of how well this rich and complex ecosystem is meeting the needs of the children and families it was built to serve.

Who is this paper for? Why did we write it?

Families as Partners is for early childhood service providers, partners, advocates, funders, parents and caregivers—essentially anyone with an interest or a stake in early learning in Newark or cities like it.

The Trust recognizes how incredibly important the early childhood development landscape is to our children's overall growth and development. We researched and wrote this paper to gain a better understanding of the early childhood ecosystem as a whole: its strengths, its diversity, potential gaps and opportunities, and how the various parts work together in support of the whole.

How Did We Approach this Research?

We applied two lenses that have become widely recognized and supported in the early childhood field:

Multigenerational – This lens recognizes the importance of the caregiver-child relationship to children's early development. Research shows that programs that involve two or more generations of the family are more likely to succeed.

Multi-sectoral – This lens takes into account the many different sectors that play a role in early childhood development. In Newark, programs and services are delivered by networks of state, county, and city-level government agencies, as well as county and city-based nonprofit organizations. Funding and support come from both public and philanthropic resources.

WHO IS THE NEWARK TRUST FOR EDUCATION?

The Newark Trust is focused on improving the conditions for learning in Newark. To realize this goal, the Trust coordinates ideas, people, and resources supporting the efficient and effective delivery of a quality public education to all children in Newark.

Everything the Trust does is guided by our belief in equitable education opportunities for every child. Our work is only possible because of the dedicated partners who share our vision and values. Together, we are shaping a public education system where all of Newark's children can learn, grow, and thrive.

There are amazing programs in 0-3 in Newark. For families, it's not that there is a lack of resources — it's about parents being partners with programs from when the child is in the womb.

— Stakeholder

The Ecosystem for Optimal Early Childhood Development

Our research looked at six major areas of work in early childhood development. Since some of the areas, like Positive Parenting and Strong Families, and Quality Childcare and Early Learning, naturally overlap with one another, we regrouped them into four domains when organizing this paper.



- Effective Research and Advocacy
- Maternal and Child Health
- Positive Parenting and Stable Families
- Quality Childcare and Early Learning

Stakeholder Interviews

Our team interviewed 80 people, including parents and caregivers of children ages 0-3, heads of child care agencies, leaders of organizations that support maternal, early childhood, and family services, and district and state representatives who lead early learning initiatives. Most of our interviews were conducted between February and April of 2020. Circumstances related to COVID-19 limited the number of parents, caregivers and childcare programs that were available to speak with us. Similarly, some representatives of key government agencies were fully engaged in their pandemic response and could not participate.

Five Emerging Guidelines

We needed a framework for making sense of what we were seeing and learning across the four areas of work. Through collaborative conversations as a team and with partners, we arrived at the following five emerging guidelines as a useful way of organizing our initial observations:

1. What are **accepted standards**, or norms and expectations, for each area of work? Are programs and services aligned with accepted standards?
2. What do **multi-generation approaches**, involving caregivers *and* children, look like within each area of work? Are programs using these approaches?
3. What do **culturally sustaining, strengths-based approaches**, that respect and include diverse families, look like within each area of work? Are programs and services using these approaches?
4. How are programs and services conducting outreach to families? Are they ensuring **equitable access** for all families with children ages 0-3?
5. How are programs and services linking up with **systemic supports** for families (such as food assistance and healthcare)? What do systemic supports look like in each area of work?

The paper applies the guidelines to each area of work in order to show the strengths and opportunities for improvement within each. Our hope is that the paper will spark new opportunities for meaningful collaboration among those who strive each and every day to make the early years a period of healthy growth and development for all Newark children.

I. Effective Research and Advocacy



What Does Newark Offer?

Research shows that the brain undergoes its fastest and most important developments during the first three years of life. As understanding of rapid early devel-

opment grows, so does people's interest in supporting health and learning programs for children ages 0-3. In Newark, early childhood research and advocacy are areas of strength: the city is an active site for studies and state-level campaigns that seek to influence early learning policies and programs.

What Did We Observe?

In Newark advocacy efforts, family leadership is often front and center. Many groups embrace multi-generational approaches that engage two or three generations of family members in advocacy leadership. Campaigns are strengthened when their leaders have direct experience with the issues, and there are immense benefits to families being able to advocate for their own well-being. Family leadership also helps to ensure that cultural norms and experiences are recognized and valued in advocacy efforts.

I think the concern about the 0-3 age group has been more than ever in New Jersey. Policy makers need to understand the importance of 0-3. The brain develops quickly at that time. We can't waste it!

— Stakeholder (Advocacy)



TABLE 1: Preliminary Assessment of Research and Advocacy

| GUIDELINES | MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH |
|---|---|
| Accepted standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• CDC milestones for child development• Ages and Stages Questionnaire• Standardized instruments for screening in mental health, domestic violence, and early intervention adopted by homevisiting programs and providers/ experts in these areas |
| Multi-generation approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Homevisiting and hospital-based pregnancy and parenting programs emphasize maternal and child health (prenatal to 3)• Homevisiting emphasizes relational mental health and maternal and child health• Relational mental health approaches by infant and toddler mental health experts. |
| Strengths-based and culturally sustaining | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hiring Community Health Workers and other staff from local communities• Developing empathy and cultural competence and language access through workshops for staff• Understanding and integrating community practices around pregnancy, birth, and raising children |
| Equitable access | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A small percentage of the total number of families avail of the excellent infrastructure of maternal and child health and homevisiting services in the city. Despite programs and service providers reporting numerous modes of outreach, flat-funding and limited reach reduce the access that parents have to them. |
| Systemic supports | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Homevisiting programs, Central Intake/ Early Childhood Hub, Programs for Parents, Sister-to-Sister Community Doula, SPAN, Essex County Community Support Organization, medical providers and others routinely connect participating families with social service agencies (public and non-profit) |

II. Maternal and Child Health



What Does Newark Offer?

Newark is part of a strong system of maternal and child health services in New Jersey. Programs often begin in pregnancy and focus on the mental and physical well-being

of mothers-to-be, children, parents, and caregivers. Homevisiting, where providers meet with families in the comfort of their home environment, is a particularly effective way to build connections and deliver services. Many providers and mental health experts stress the importance of relational mental health—the idea that relationships between caregivers and their children, and also their providers, are key to mental well-being.

Every child develops differently. They hit milestones at different times. Knowing this helps me be patient.

— Stakeholder (Parent)



What Did We Observe?

The 10 parents we spoke with strongly agreed that hospitals and medical providers are their main sources for information on healthy child development. From providers, we learned that multi-generational and relationship-based approaches such as those offered in homevisiting are critical. By establishing trust with families, home visitors can help parents deepen their connection to their child and better support the child's early growth and development. Cultural competence is also critical. Many organiza-

tions hire staff from the communities they work in. Although the quality of Newark's maternal and child health programs is strong, access is a lingering concern. The number of families served by programs is just a fraction of the total number of infants and toddlers in the city.

TABLE 2: Preliminary Assessment of Maternal and Child Health

| GUIDELINES | MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH |
|---|---|
| Accepted standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Centers for Disease Control child development milestones guide the work of many maternal and child health programs in Newark.• The Ages and Stages Questionnaire (a caregiver survey that collects detailed information on child development milestones) is widely used among health-focused service providers.• Many programs use standardized tools to screen for mental health, domestic violence, and early intervention needs. |
| Multi-generation approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pregnancy and parenting programs, whether homevisiting or hospital-based, naturally center on parents and children.• Homevisiting programs and early childhood mental health experts stress the importance of relational approaches to mental and physical health. |
| Strengths-based and culturally sustaining | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hiring community health workers and other staff from local communities.• Staff workshops help to develop empathy and cultural competence. |
| Equitable access | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only a small percentage of Newark families use the excellent maternal and child health services available in the city. Providers report using many different forms of outreach, but flat-funding limits their reach and sustainability. |
| Systemic supports | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Many types of programs routinely connect participating families with social service agencies, both public and non-profit. |

III: Positive Parenting and Stable Families



What Does Newark Offer?

Parents and caregivers are their children's first and most important teachers, and Newark has a rich, diverse array of programs that help caregivers become more confident as they grow their parenting skills. But such preparation is only the beginning. Organizations such as Programs for Parents and SPAN prepare parents to become advocates and leaders for issues of importance to their families. Nonprofit food pantries and public agencies like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families help families gain stability in times of need. And a number of Newark nonprofits support critical needs such as housing, legal aid, and safety.

Regardless of income and race, all parents want the same thing. They want their children to be healthy and safe. They want to create nurturing environments for their children. The dreams of all parents are the same.

— Stakeholder (Positive Parenting)



What Did We Observe?

Similar to maternal and child health, parent support programs typically cater to the needs of caregivers as well as children. For program staff, connecting with parents is key. Most homevisiting programs and ward-based organizations hire their staff from within the communities they serve, and respect for families and cultures is of utmost importance. As with health, the number of families being served

by parent support programs is far less than the number of families with young children in Newark. Ease of access is a critical concern. Most of the mothers we spoke with said they found it difficult to learn about and connect with programs and services.

TABLE 3: Preliminary Assessment of Parenting and Family Stability

| GUIDELINES | MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH |
|---|---|
| Accepted standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Homevisiting programs have well-developed, standardized approaches to their services, as do large community-based organizations.• The Family Success Institute offers frameworks for promoting the development and well-being of young children and their families.• Central Intake and Programs for Parents use standardized processes for connecting families with childcare and other resources. |
| Multi-generation approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ward-based organizations and Family Success Centers support parents and children through a variety of economic and social programming.• Homevisiting programs and the Family Support Organization of Essex County help parents develop positive parenting approaches and connect with other resources. |
| Strengths-based and culturally sustaining | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasizing that all parents want the best for their child.• Including trusted messengers from the local community in outreach efforts.• Providing families with “warm” connections to community resources. |
| Equitable access | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only a fraction of eligible families use the numerous programs and services offered by large ward-based organizations and family support centers. Publicly-funded programs have been able to sustain their work over decades, yet smaller privately-funded programs sometimes have to change their scope and scale year-by-year, due to changes in funding. |
| Systemic supports | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ward-based organizations and community agencies routinely connect families with social service agencies |

IV: Quality, Affordable Childcare and Early Learning



What Does Newark Offer?

Newark has many organizations working to make sure families have access to high-quality, affordable childcare and early learning. Ward-based community

organizations and childcare centers offer infant and toddler care, and the Newark Public Schools early learning program coordinates with several of these agencies. Major cultural institutions like the Newark Library and Newark Museum of Art have shown interest in creating more programs and offerings for children under preschool age. Early learning in Newark is also receiving a boost from campaigns and grant making programs led by The Leon and Toby Cooperman Family Foundation and the Newark Trust.

I chose the center based on how it is set up and if they are hands-on with the children and not just babysitting them.

— Stakeholder (Parent)

What Did We Observe?

Early learning is so much more than babysitting, and that's certainly true in Newark. All providers, whether based in centers or homes, list daily learning routines that address all key areas of early childhood development: motor, verbal, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills. Center-based staff have a mix of professional certifications, including college degrees, credits, and the Child Development Associate credential. Programs like NAEYC and Grow NJ Kids support improving the quality of childcare services, but many childcare organizations offering early care have yet to embrace these programs. From parents, we learned that they find childcare costly and tend to rely on trusted friends and relatives when making childcare decisions. Clearly, there are opportunities for greater exploration of both parents' and providers' perspectives and experiences.



We found that the numbers of infants and toddlers served by large providers is small compared to the number of infants and toddlers in Newark. Cost continues to be a barrier. One study shows that a two-income family in New Jersey may spend almost 15% of its income on infant and toddler care, and a female head of household may spend more than 40%. The actual percentages are likely to be higher for Newark, given the higher cost of living and lower household income. In a major win for childcare advocacy, the state of New Jersey announced a \$54 million funding increase for the Child Care Subsidy in 2019. The additional funds are beginning to make a very real and positive difference for small childcare providers and the families they serve.

TABLE 4: Preliminary Assessment of Childcare and Early Learning

| GUIDELINES | MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH |
|---|---|
| Accepted standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• GROW NJ quality rating framework for infant and toddler environments.• B.A. in Early Childhood Education, Child Development Associate credential, CITE credential for childcare professionals.• Early Head Start suite of curriculum, assessment, professional development, accreditation, and parent engagement.• Ages and Stages Questionnaire and other assessments like BRIGANCE and BAYLEY. |
| Multi-generation approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Programs for Parents and the Newark Trust support positive parenting and early learning through ongoing parenting sessions and a homevisiting program.• Larger childcare organizations support two-generation approaches to parenting, family stability, and early learning. |
| Strengths-based and culturally sustaining | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hiring childcare workers from the communities that children are from.• Training staff on cultural competence and responsiveness.• Having families participate in and lead workshops and programs. |
| Equitable access | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Many issues (childcare costs, immigration status, availability of information, and trust in safety and quality of care) limit the number of families placing their infants and toddlers in childcare settings. Supports like the Child Care Subsidy, however, have steady funding and have even been expanded. |
| Systemic supports | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Larger childcare providers and Early Head Start centers have connections with social service agencies and can facilitate connections for families that come to their center. Other state, county, and local agencies also facilitate these connections. |

Next Steps

Now, the real work begins! The Newark Trust for Education hopes this paper will be a blueprint for ongoing coalition-building and action in Newark's early learning community. We have identified a number of ways for the Trust and our partners to continue to build on these findings as we work together to improve the quality of early childhood services in our city.

- 1. Clarify the guidelines.** The Trust developed the five emerging guidelines as a helpful framework for organizing this paper. We now see an opportunity for extended dialogue with partners to flesh out and clarify what the guidelines mean to them. Such conversations could pave the way for a paper that captures shared definitions, practices, experiences, and a path forward.
- 2. Build trust and warm connections.** We heard during interviews that trusted messengers, warm connections (where the parent is introduced to a program by walking through the steps), and including parents as leaders are the best ways to engage parents. The Trust and its partners can support these practices at the earliest opportunity so that parents become informed partners.
- 3. Scale and sustain successful programs.** Most programs we surveyed have a modest reach and are not available to the thousands of families in Newark with infants and toddlers. Partners in philanthropy, advocacy, and government are urged to push for the expansion of strong programs like homevisiting so that they reach all who can benefit from them.
- 4. Continue developing multi-sectoral collaborations.** Many stakeholders already work in collaboration to provide aligned services and better support families. The Trust and its partners are well positioned to further develop and strengthen multi-sectoral collaborations in ways that enhance the quality, reach, and sustainability of early childhood programs and services.

Let's start a conversation.

The Newark Trust for Education is eager to be a partner and resource to all who have an interest in early learning in Newark. To speak with us about this paper, the Trust's programs, the wealth of early childhood resources available in our city, or any other matter, please contact earlylearn@newarktrust.org.

To read the full version of *Families as Partners*, please visit www.newarktrust.org/familiesaspartners

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