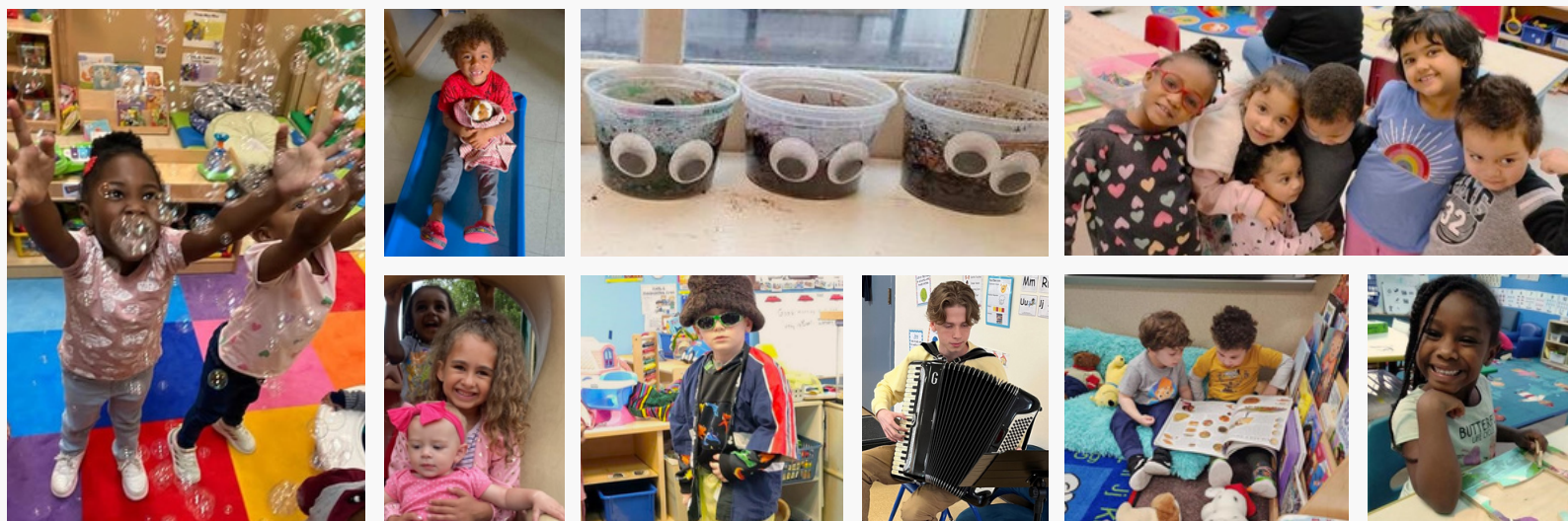




ANNUAL REPORT 2023-2024



CREATING LIFELONG LEARNERS, ONE CHILD AT A TIME



**200 WEST 11TH STREET
ERIE, PA 16501
814-874-0144**

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

"What we know is that the more we invest in early childhood education, the better prepared children will be to thrive in school, and the better prepared they will be to succeed in life."

– Angela Duckworth.

A MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

As we reflect on another year of growth, challenges, and triumphs, I am filled with gratitude and pride for the incredible work Early Connections continues to do in shaping the futures of our youngest learners. The support we receive from families, educators, community partners, and donors has been instrumental in advancing our mission, and together, we are making a lasting impact on the lives of children and families in our community.



At the heart of our work is the belief that every child deserves access to high-quality early education that fosters their social, emotional, and cognitive development. This year, we have continued to provide a safe, nurturing environment where children can explore, learn, and grow. Through our programs, we focus on laying a strong foundation for academic success, while also ensuring that children develop the skills they need to become confident, compassionate, and capable individuals.

The challenges of the past year have only strengthened our commitment to the critical role early childhood education plays in preparing children for the future. The entire Early Connections organization has worked tirelessly to adapt to the evolving needs of our community, expanding access to our programs, enhancing professional development for our educators, and advocating for policies that prioritize early learning.

The Board of Directors is proud to report that, thanks to your continued support, we continue to make significant strides in helping children build the skills necessary for school readiness. As we look ahead, we remain dedicated to our vision of a future where every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their background.

Thank you for being a part of this journey. Together, we are creating a brighter future for all children.

Warm regards,

MICHAEL PLAZONY
BOARD PRESIDENT



BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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TO OUR READERS

ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

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Director, Early Childhood Workforce,
Intermediary Supervisor Early Childhood
Apprenticeship Program

Kimberly Kuehl
Workforce Coordinator, NW Region,
Early Childhood Apprenticeship
Program

Maggie Warren
Pre-Apprenticeship Coordinator, NW
Region
Early Childhood Pre-Apprenticeship
Program



We are pleased to present the Annual Report for Early Connections for the 2023-2024 fiscal year. This report provides an overview of our achievements, financial performance, and strategic initiatives over the past year.



Throughout the year, we continued to work through the post-Covid childcare staffing crisis. Centers reopened classrooms and by year-end, the necessary staff was hired, and we celebrated the reopening of our John Horan location. Together, our team worked tirelessly to make this possible.

Additionally, Early Connections continued to extend its impact beyond our centers. Through Erie's Future Fund, more children had access to quality preschools within Erie County. As NW region Intermediary, expanded early childhood pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs continued to address the child care staffing crisis. Our efforts to advocate and collaborate with partner agencies in evaluating new services and programs intended to positively impact the lives of children at the local, regional, and state levels have grown.

As we look ahead, we remain committed to developing solid partnerships in leadership, advocacy, high quality early care and education. Our quality centers continue making a difference in the lives of our children and families. We will also continue to work beyond our centers to strengthen the impact of Erie's Future Fund to serve more children with quality preschool opportunities, and our Early Childhood Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Programming, which ultimately helps reduce the effects of the childcare staffing crisis. We are confident that with the continued support of our stakeholders, we will achieve even greater success in the coming years.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to our board, staff, community leaders and partnering agencies, and our supporters, for the unwavering support and dedication to our organization. Your trust and confidence in Early Connections has been instrumental to our success.

Thank you for taking the time to review our Annual Report. We are proud of the progress, together as a team, that we have made. We look forward to your continued support and engagement as we work together to support the success of our children and families through our shared vital work.

Sincerely,

MICHELLE M HARKINS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Early Care and Education (ECE): Quality early care and education (ECE) is provided for children at three locations within the city of Erie, one in Union City, and one in North East. Our programs include 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. Each year, Early Connections serves over 275 children between birth and age 12.

Each Early Connections location is licensed by PA Dept. of Human Services and participates in Keystone STARS. One of our centers has an inclusive classroom in partnership with the Erie School District. Creative Curriculum for infants, toddlers and preschool is used in every classroom.

Early Connections' teachers are competent, qualified, and caring persons who have a heart for helping young children develop and learn. Children in our classrooms experience developmentally-appropriate learning activities, from infancy through school-age, which fulfill the PA Early Learning Standards and are also engaging and interesting to young learners. Children's learning and development is supported through high quality programming, utilizing years of evidence-based research that supports long-term positive impacts on a child.

PRE-K COUNTS

Pre-K Counts is a Free, state funded preschool program designed to increase access to quality preschool programs for families earning up to 300% of the federal income poverty level (ex: family of four earning \$90,000 a year). Eligible children must be at between age 3 and younger than the age for entry into kindergarten. The program prioritizes children who may be at risk of school failure due to one or more risk factors. Pre-K Counts programs focus on building the social, emotional, and cognitive skills of children to prepare them for Kindergarten.

Early Connections offers full-day Pre-K Counts classrooms at 4 locations plus 1 classroom in partnership with Iroquois Elementary School.



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.

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

INFANT TODDLER CONTRACTED SLOTS

A Free Childcare Program for Qualifying Families

The Infant Toddler Contracted Slots (ITCS) Program builds upon the already established infrastructure of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts (PKC) Program. Children in the ITCS program receive priority placement for Pre-K Counts.

- Free full time care for Child Care Works eligible families with children ages 6 weeks to 36 months
- 24 children received ITCS funding
- Low child to staff ratios in child care classrooms
- Diapers and wipes provided for the hours the child is in care
- Allows continued focus on quality programming while building strong transitions from infant-toddler to pre-kindergarten classrooms
- 3 Early Connections locations accept ITCS funded enrollments



ERIE'S FUTURE FUND

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. Scholarships accepted at 40+ high-quality early care and education program locations in Erie County. Scholarships are funded from within Erie County through individual donations and Pre-K Earned Income Tax Credits.



THE PROBLEM: SCHOOL READINESS
Children entering kindergarten who are not prepared have a significant impact now & in the future on Erie County's economy and quality of life.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO ENTER KINDERGARTEN IN PROCESS OR PROFICIENT IN THE 5 KEY LEARNING AREAS

5 Key Learning Areas

THE SOLUTION: ERIE'S FUTURE FUND
Scholarships pay for up to five half-days a week; the educational component of a program.

Since 2012, over **1600** scholarship opportunities have been provided.

Since 2016, the **Summer Scholars** program decreased the educational "summer slide" for over **200** children.

SCHOLARS in process or proficient in the **5 Key Learning Areas**

2023-2024 School Year:
100% of 3 Year Old Scholars
100% of 4 Year Old Scholars

THE RESULTS: SUCCESS IN KINDERGARTEN
Children who are prepared for kindergarten.

less likely to use special education services & repeat a grade

less likely to become involved in juvenile crime

will be more likely to graduate on time & enter skilled workforce

Erie's Future Fund is administered by Early Connections and was formed in 2011, an outgrowth of the Erie Community Foundation's Early Childhood Advisory Panel in partnership with members of the Early Learning Investment Commission and United Way of Erie County's Success By Six and Erie Together.

REGISTERED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

The Registered Apprenticeship (through the Department of Labor & Industry), offers ECE employees the opportunity to earn their credential or degrees for free while working a designated number of training hours under supervision at their place of employment. Candidates “earn while they learn” as the apprenticeship acknowledges that working in a professional environment and gaining experience is itself a recognized form of education.

The Registered Apprenticeship program has grown exponentially over the last year as we currently are actively serving 7 counties throughout North Western Pennsylvania and have expanded to two Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) partnerships - Penn West University and CCBC. Adding another IHE partner allowed the program to support more apprentices and address challenges we faced as Penn West redesigned their CDA certification program.

Child Development Associate (CDA) July 2023– June 2024

- 13 students completed their CDA registered apprenticeships
- We had 11 active apprentices in varying stages of completion
 - o 3 have earned their CDA
 - o 4 are in the process of testing / observation

Associate of Science (AS) - July 2023– June 2024

- 8 active AS apprentices are currently taking classes



Kimberly Kuehl,
Workforce Coordinator
NW Region

PA APPRENTICESHIP AND PRE-APPRENTICESHIP AWARDS

On March 14, the first annual ceremony for the PA Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Awards was held in Pittsburgh. The awards for individuals are presented in recognition of leadership qualities, problem solving, motivation and willingness to learn skills. Sierra Peebles, was voted Outstanding Registered Apprentice for the State of Pennsylvania. Sierra is an employee of the YMCA of Greater Erie and completed her CDA Registered Apprenticeship through the NW Region ECE Apprenticeship Program administered by Early Connections, sponsored by the District 1199c and funded by the PASSHE PDO.



Pictured Left to Right: Kim Beers, Director of ECE Apprenticeship Workforce; Jen Coblenz, Director of Childcare at the Eastside YMCA of Greater Erie; Sierra Peebles, Outstanding Registered Apprentice in PA; Tara Loew, Director of Apprenticeship & Training Office for the state of PA



This project is supported by the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) of Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services (DHS) and Pennsylvania's Department of Education (PDE). For more information, visit dhs.pa.gov and education.pa.gov



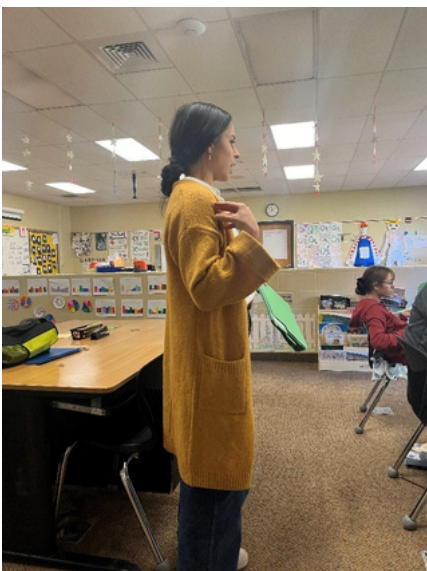
Early Connections is the NW Region Early Childhood (EC) Apprenticeship Intermediary, under the auspices of the District 1199c Apprenticeship Training Fund and in partnership with PennWest Edinboro/PASSHE PDO. The Registered Apprenticeship program provides low to no-cost continuing education opportunities and on-the-job learning supports to increase the number of CDA, Associates and Bachelor's degree credentialed workforce candidates in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) field.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PRE-APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

Early Connections continues to be designated by the PA DL&I ATO (PA Department of Labor & Industry's Apprenticeship & Training Office) as the Regional Sponsor for the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Pre-Apprenticeship Program. As there is high demand for quality ECE professionals in the state of Pennsylvania, ECE Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs at the high school level have adapted their curriculums to provide the related technical instruction (RTI) and on-the-job-training (OJT) required to earn the ECE industry recognized credential, the Child Development Associate (CDA). This credential not only requires a student to pass an exam, but completion of a robust portfolio, documentation of working 480 hours within a center-based classroom and being assessed during a 4-hour long observation to ensure quality care at the job level. Maggie Warren, a trained Professional Development (PD) Specialist through the CDA Council, joined the team as Pre-Apprenticeship Program Coordinator in February 2024 to continue the program focus on CDA completion with Kim Beers, the Director of Apprenticeship Programming at Early Connections.

Within the first year of programming, significant growth occurred, not only in the number of school partnerships, but the amount of student participants and quality of program enhancements. As earning the CDA has several pieces, the Pre-Apprenticeship Program has taken time to visit and partner with 4 new schools, totaling to 7 school partnerships, to offer classroom supplies and wrap around supports to ECE students to assist with CDA completion, employment connection, and linking to free higher education programs for post-graduation, but also dual enrollment opportunities to earn free college credit while in high school.

The Pre-Apprenticeship Team is looking forward to working more closely with the ECE PDO@PASSHE and PennWest University to continue offering Dual Enrollment course offerings during both the Fall and Spring semesters of the 2024/2025 academic year. The team is focused on creating system-changes to create more student success and a qualified ECE workforce in PA



Maggie Warren, Pre-Apprenticeship Coordinator presenting information on programming to classroom of ECE Students at ECE CTE program at Seneca Highlands CTC

Across the 7 partner schools, 40 students were active in the ATO as Pre-Apprentices, which has provided them with materials and 1:1 meetings to assist with tracking their progress towards CDA completion.

- Within the first academic year of this program, 7 Pre-Apprentices completed the program by earning their CDA and either became employed as an ECE Professional or moved forward to an advanced ECE degree post-graduation.
- The project portfolio required for the CDA is often a challenging piece to complete. Tools have been created by the Pre-Apprenticeship Team, as well as a plan for a future teacher-based training to help with understanding and completion of this project.
- Connection to Local Workforce Boards of our partner school regions, PACareerLink and Workforce Solutions for North Central PA, has been established, to help connect students with professional related resources and trainings, as well as other supportive programs.

THIS APPRENTICESHIP AND PRE-APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM IS SUPPORTED BY THE PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF LABOR AND INDUSTRY OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR AS PART OF AN AWARD TOTALING \$94,017.00 (19%) WITH 81% (\$379,990.00) FINANCED FROM NON-GOVERNMENTAL SOURCES.

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

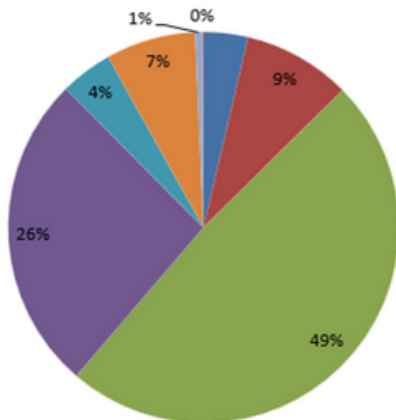
JULY 1, 2023 - JUNE 30, 2024

REVENUE

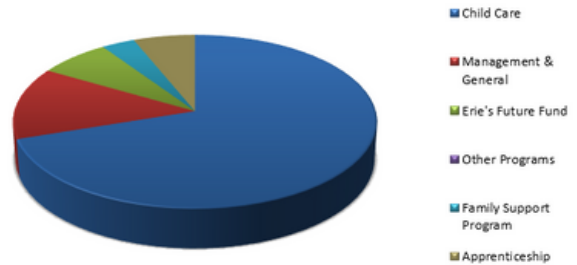
Revenue for Year Ended 6/30/24	
	2024 Revenue
Contributions	115,122
Erie's Future Fund	280,612
Governmental Contributions	1,528,000
Program Service Fees	824,260
Government Food Programs	136,031
Apprenticeship Program	233,205
Investment Income	17,585
Other	4052
Total Revenue	3,138,867

Revenue for Year Ended 6/30/2024

- Contributions
- Erie's Future Fund
- Governmental Contributions
- Program Service Fees
- Government Food Programs
- Apprenticeship Program
- Investment Income
- Other



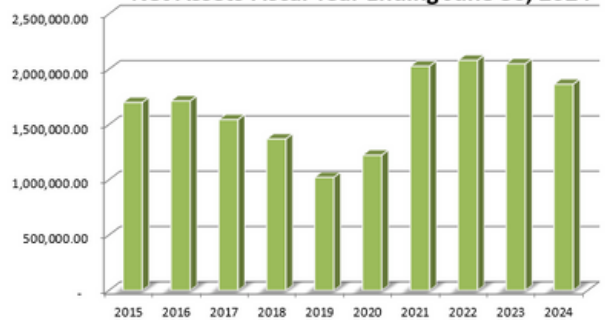
EXPENSES



2024 Audited Expenses

Child Care	2,322,838.00
Management & General	448,378.00
Erie's Future Fund	236,810.00
Other Programs	183.00
Family Support Program	110,591.00
Apprenticeship	204,575.00
Total	3,323,375.00

Net Assets Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2024



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.

Gold
Transparency
2024

Candid.



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
Alicia Pelkowski
Alivia Haibach
Amy James
Barbara Dengler
Brenda J Morrison
Britton Family Foundation
Bruce & Bonnie Kern
Carpenters Union Local 420
Craig & Shelley Hill
Daniel Pertl
Daryl Dambaugh
DBA Presque Isle Boat Tours
DBA Woody's Backwater Grill
Emily Stoll
Erie Bank
Erie Beer Company
Erie Community Foundation
Erie Community Foundation - Erie Gives Day
Gail and Jim Kurre
Housing Authority of the City of Erie
Jamie Schumacher
Dr. Janet Wojtalik
Jay and Ruth Alberstadt
Jayne Deutsch
Jerry and Buggy Cass
Joe & Nancy Ruffa
Joe and Brenda Comstock
John and Nicole VanTassel
John Vantassel
Kathryn Ruffa
Katie and Matthew Jones
Katie Jones
Kevin Seeker
Kiwanis Club
Kyle & Casey Foust
Matthew Zinna

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Mike and Katie Ruffa
Mike and LeeAnn Thomas
Michael Plazony
Nuova Aurora
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Patty McMahon
Plazony Family Foundation
Rachel Loper
Rhonda Scouten - Scouten's Butcher Shop
Richard Vicary, Jr.
Rum Runners
Santa's Helpers
Sean & Kim Beers
Sedney Enterprises
St Martin Center
Stephen and Alicia Pelkowski
Sunshine Group of Erie
Tim Scouten - Scouten Enterprises
United Way of Erie County

Erie's Future Fund

*Preschool Scholarship Fund
Administered by Early Connections*

American Tinning and Galvinizing
C.A. Curtze Company
Erie insurance
Gerald J. Vogt & Connie Kerr Vogt
Jefferson Educational Society
La Nuova Aurora Society
Lilly Broadcasting of PA LLC
Mark J Corey and Associates
McGill, Power, Bell & Associates
Northwest Bank
Scott Enterprises
United Concordia
UPMC Health Plan

Restricted Donations

Erie Bank - Central Pennsylvania Scholarship Fund
Erie Insurance - Early Explorers Program
Henry A. and Mary J. MacDonald (Bridge Funding)
Sister's of St. Joseph (Food Pantry)

We have made every effort to list all contributions and gifts received during the period July 1, 2018 through June 30, 2019. We apologize for any errors or omissions and ask you to contact Early Connections Administrative Offices at 814-874-0144 with corrections



♥ Children in play do not
play to develop and learn,
but they do develop and
learn when they play.

- Michael Hall Larsen



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**Early Connections
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**Early Connections
John E Horan Garden
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814-454-9713**

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