

We know that economic adversity experienced early in life compromises brain development, health and earnings over a lifetime. The ages between 0-3 are the critical years. This short window of time is our opportunity to disrupt the consequences of poverty, both for the potential of the child and the continued success of our city.

The **Strong Start Strategy**, launched in 2014, aims to reduce poverty and expand economic prosperity in Cuyahoga County by investing in efforts that help disadvantaged families ensure that every child gets a strong start in life. In developing the strategy we were heavily influenced by brain research from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University that shows the neural connections for different brain activities develop sequentially, which means that babies need visual, sensory, and language inputs to develop the higher cognitive functions that contribute to lifelong success. Unfortunately, not all babies receive the same quantity or quality of inputs, especially language inputs. We also learned about research published by Early Education for All demonstrating that the achievement gap begins early. By the time children are 4 years of age, those from professional and higher income families have heard 30 million more words than children from low income families. Further, Dr. James Heckman, a Nobel-prize winning economist at the University of Chicago, has shown that the economic return on investment of social and educational interventions are strongest in the earliest years, and actually begin to decrease by age 4.

Armed with this information, the Foundation aims to target time and resources at programs that are working with disadvantaged young families. Specifically, we are developing partnerships with organizations and programs that:

- Deliver interventions to the youngest children, ages 0-3, and their families;
- Work to facilitate language and social-emotional development;
- Recognize that parents/primary caregivers are key to all outcomes, and that the parent-child relationship is central to any intervention;
- Utilize program evaluation techniques to generate insight into what works and why;
- Engage in advocacy to strengthen the field; and
- Participate in collaborations that might multiply the value of investments.

We are not accepting proposals for this strategy; rather, in its first stages, we are working collaboratively with organizations to develop fundable projects. Cristin Slesh will be staffing the project in partnership with the rest of the Foundation Management Services team.

54% of Cleveland children live in poverty.

For the future of each child, for the future of Cleveland, what we do today matters.

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