

thinksmall

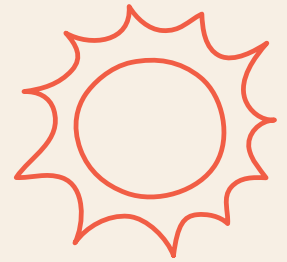
LEADERS IN EARLY LEARNING

CULTIVATE. NURTURE. GROW!

2024
Annual Report



Open Letter from Tracy and Cisa



“Seeds of Change”

Dear Friends of Think Small:

As we reflect on the past year, we are filled with hope and excitement for the future landscape of early care and childhood education. Together, we have planted the seeds of change, laying the groundwork for a brighter, more equitable future for our youngest learners. Our efforts to cultivate, nurture, and grow have expanded our impact in the state and beyond. We are proud to share the progress we’ve made.

The seeds we’ve sown are rooted in innovation, quality and equity—hallmarks of Think Small’s expertise in the early childhood landscape. We are nurturing a system that supports every child, family, and educator, and we are growing a movement of population-level change where every child can thrive and enter kindergarten ready for success. Through strategic partnerships and tireless advocacy, we are cultivating relationships to address Minnesota’s opportunity and achievement gaps as well as the child care crisis.

This year also marked a significant transition for Think Small with the retirement of respected early childhood leader and President & CEO Barbara Yates. With 16 years at the helm serving our littlest learners, Think Small advanced innovative, data-driven solutions which influenced statewide design and adoption of its child care services delivery model. Think Small now plays a pivotal role in providing population-level data and impact in the areas of child care access, costs, and quality.

The Board of Directors was thrilled to have Cisa Keller step into this top executive role. With more than 25 years in the early care and education field, including nine years of overseeing Think Small’s government contracts and policy initiatives, Cisa is the expert of choice and poised to take the organization to the next level of influence and innovation across the state and beyond.

We concluded the first year of our three-year Strategic Plan, with a transformative goal of ensuring every child enters kindergarten with the experiences they need to not only thrive in school but in life. As we partner with educators, advocates, funders, government agencies, and policy makers, we remain focused on three core pillars: Quality, Access, and Policy and Advocacy. In the following pages, you’ll see how our collective efforts are bearing fruit!

Looking forward, we are filled with optimism for what we can achieve together. We remain committed to creating fertile ground where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

With deepest gratitude,



Cisa Keller
President and
Chief Executive Officer



Tracy Nordstrom
Chair of the Board

Progress on the Strategic Plan

18,000

Enrollments in advanced professional development courses.

4,900

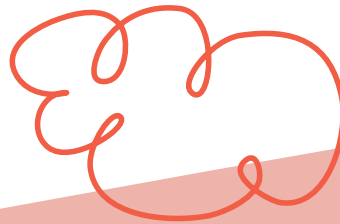
Early Learning Scholarships awarded to children from priority populations: children of teen parents, children in foster care or child protective services, or children experiencing homelessness.

48%

Of more than 220,000 child care slots earned a Parent Aware quality rating.

3,000

New child care slots opened in Minnesota's "Child Care Access Equity Areas".



Three Strategic Areas for Early Care and Education



Quality Increase and retain the number and percentage of family child care and child care center programs participating in Parent Aware in the seven-county metro area to meet the needs of families.



Access Increase and retain the number of slots and jobs in licensed family child care and child care center programs in the seven-county metro area to meet the needs of families while fully optimizing all financial assistance funds Think Small administrators in Hennepin and Ramsey counties.



Policy and Advocacy Create and change legislative and administrative policies to support increases in access to quality early learning opportunities that meet the needs of families and increase the number of quality slots and jobs.



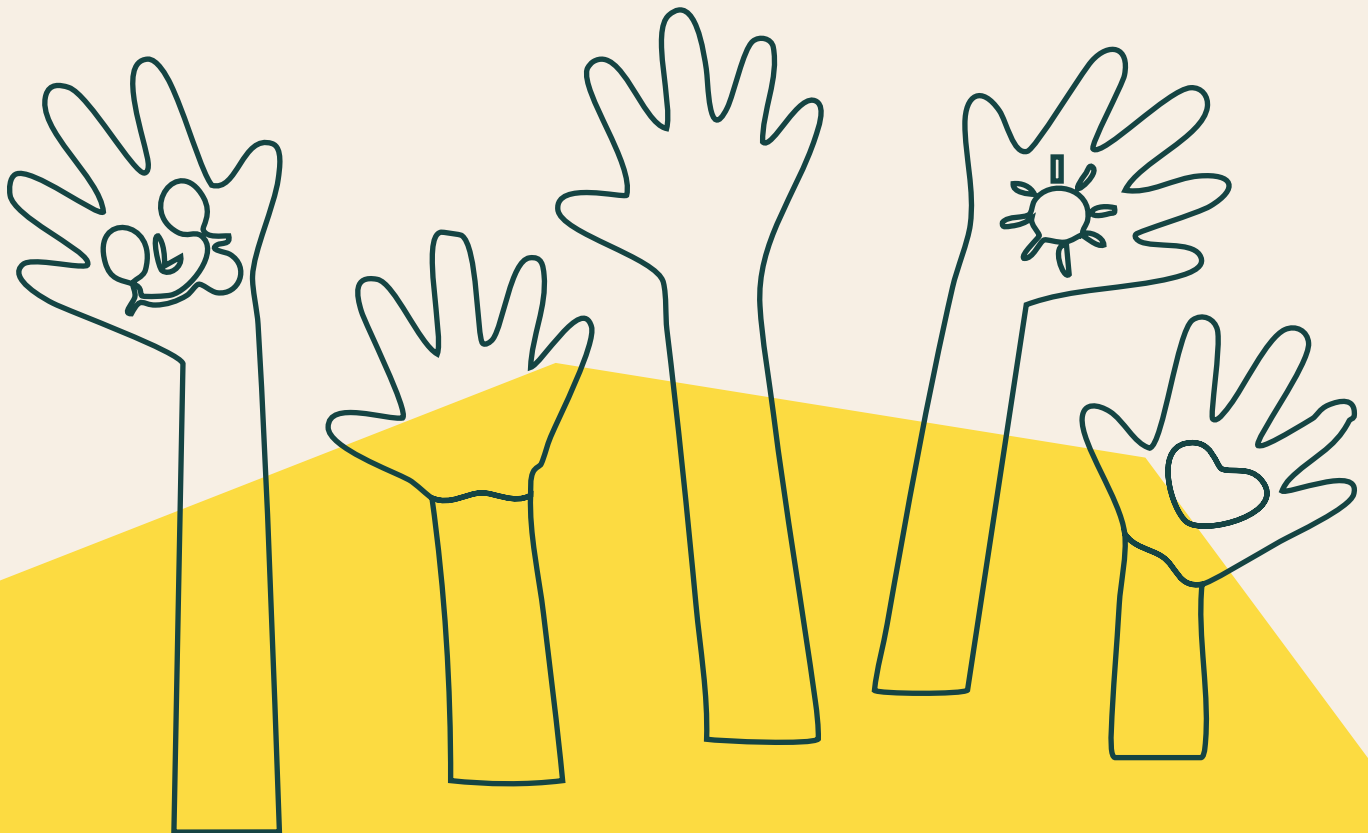
Cultivate.

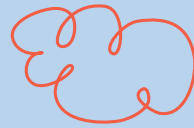
Cultivating Partnerships

It's only by working together that we are able to reach our population-level result of all children being prepared for kindergarten. Think Small pursues systems change through partnerships because Minnesota's achievement gap is the result of opportunity gaps built into unjust systems.

In addition to families, educators, and child care providers, our current partners are school districts, Promise Neighborhoods, researchers, state agencies, policy makers, and other nonprofits working in the fields of early childhood, education, health, human services, and homelessness. Highlighted partnerships include Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) and 80x3 by Greater Twin Cities United Way. We work with state and local governments to surround child care providers with business supports, training and professional development, program start-up grants, and coaching, and administer Early Learning Scholarships for low-income families with young children.

These partners include the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Minnesota Department of Education, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, Hennepin County, Ramsey County, City of Minneapolis, and City of St. Paul.





Policy and Advocacy Highlight

Think Small led efforts to improve child care access in Minnesota with the Great Start Affordability Scholarships bill, which aimed to ensure no family pays more than 7% of their income on child care. Though the bill didn't pass, our [Child Care Calculator](#) demonstrated the potential impact and built momentum for future initiatives.

Following the READ Act's 2023 mandate for evidence-based literacy in public schools, Think Small attempted to extend the focus to early childhood programs. We hosted Small Talks on literacy practices in quality child care and introduced a bill aligned with the READ Act. While the bill didn't pass, the effort will persist.



Nearly 1,000 parent contacts were made to Minnesota legislators, advocating to address the challenges of a broken child care system.



Think Small policy and advocacy efforts grow the number of parents who publicly share their personal stories of struggling with child care costs to help increase awareness and enact change.

Jess Rhoades (St. Paul, Minn.),
working mother of two children under age three

“ Sharing my testimony publicly was intimidating at first, but thanks to the wonderful folks of Think Small, I received guidance and reassurance as I formulated my thoughts and prepared for the hearing. Now, I talk to every parent I meet about affordable child care and I share the financial calculator tool to show them the possibility we are fighting for.

Child care advocacy is a cause that lifts everyone, and gives us all a hope for a brighter future. Whatever your identity or the causes that are most dear to you, we all start off as children. All of us who choose to have children care for their wellbeing and, whether or not we have children, we will be impacted by the coming generations. A well-supported family contributes to a society that can accomplish great things together. ”





Nurture.

Training the Early Care and Education Workforce

The landscape of child care in Minnesota faces challenges and opportunities. In addition to the high costs for child care for families, there continues to be a shortage of quality family child care programs and child care centers to meet the demand for care. Think Small continues to make progress in improving the quality and availability of early care and education through professional development, consultation, and coaching.



Nearly 18,000 enrollments in professional development to advance careers in early care and childhood education.

Nearly 1,000 enrollments in Think Small Institute courses.

Sally Boyd, Personality Childcare Learning Center, North Minneapolis

“I fell in love with teaching children,” shares Sally Boyd, director of Personality Childcare Learning Center in North Minneapolis. Boyd has served more than 600 children in the 20 years she’s been serving families in her family child care program. She plans to open a new child care center to meet the exponential need for child care in her community.



Sally’s program was born out of a passion to serve single mothers in her community struggling to find care for their children. She describes her approach as play-based learning and uses engaging early childhood curriculum with daily, weekly, monthly and annual plans. She shares that her number one focus is on the children’s social and emotional growth. “If I can teach them at a young age what kind of well-rounded adults they can be, that’s what I want to do.”

Building her business hasn’t been without struggle. Her connections with mentors and other providers in the community have been vital, and funds have gradually improved to support families’ costs for child care. She has been working with an advocate at Think Small who helps her sustain and advance her Parent Aware rating, demonstrating her commitment to providing high-quality care for families.

“The need is great,” shares Sally. “I can’t believe I am here today expanding my mission to impact the lives of thousands of children with a new child care center. I am so grateful to be in the lives of children and show how much I care.”



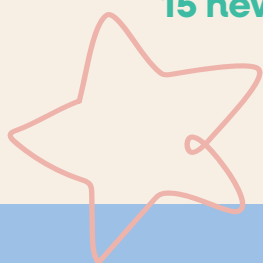
And now, after years of planning, she is amid a new commercial development acquisition to expand and open a new child care center in Minneapolis which will provide 120 child care slots for families.

Think Small Institute expands exclusive courses on healing and trauma

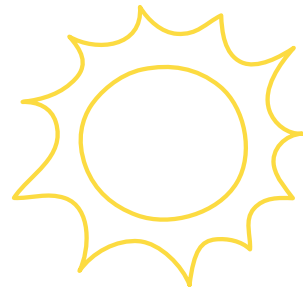
Now in its third year of operation, Think Small Institute provides high-quality professional development that meet the unique needs of early childhood educators across the nation. All Think Small Institute exclusive courses are designed with an equity focus, using anti-racist pedagogy and diversity-informed practice. The team co-constructed content with community-based subject matter experts in designing a six-module, 12-hour course titled “From Hurting to Healing: Creating Trauma-Sensitive and Healing-Centered Early Childhood Programs.” The course equips educators to recognize trauma and respond in sensitive and culturally responsive ways. The team expanded this work to include a five-module, 10-hour version of this course for Family Child Care Educators and embedded trauma-informed content into other eLearning courses.

15 new courses were added to the more than 100 titles offered.

Think Small Institute subject matter experts delivered five workshop sessions at national conferences to more than 200 people.



Redleaf Press and Think Small Institute collaborate on eLearning Courses

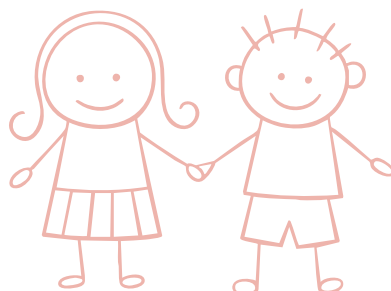
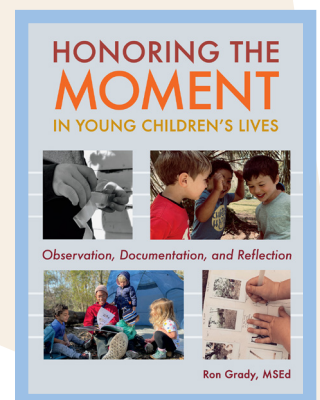
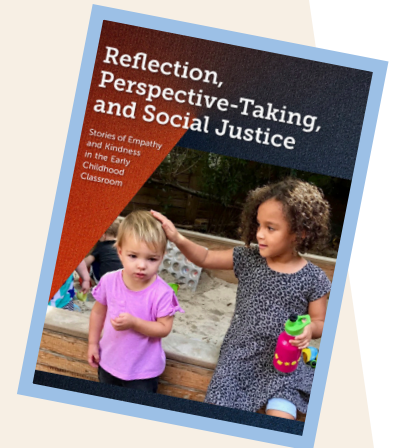
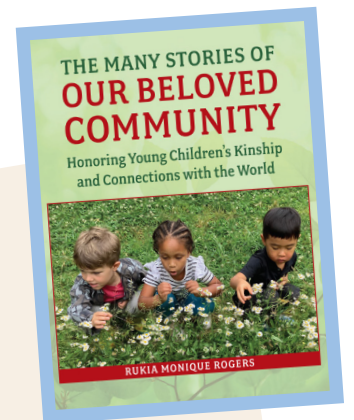
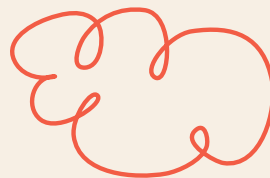


For more than 30 years, Redleaf Press has been providing exceptional resources for early childhood professionals. Redleaf Press published eight new titles this year, including three books by five first-time authors who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color. Redleaf Press is proud to have nurtured these authors and brought their diverse voices to the field.

In addition, Redleaf Press collaborated with Think Small Institute to develop eLearning courses in conjunction with authors to expand learning opportunities for early childhood educators. The books provide theory and examples of practice, and the eLearning courses provide opportunities to engage with content using scenario-based learning. This research-based approach is the most effective way to increase adult learning.

Titles this year include:

- Loose Parts in Action
- Cultivating Professional Friendships
- Caring for Self
- The Many Stories of Our Beloved Community
- Supercharge Professional Development
- Reflection, Perspective Taking, and Social Justice
- Daily Reflections for Educators, Coaches, Leaders, and Life
- Honoring the Moment in Young Children's Lives





Grow.

Parent Engagement

Children learn and develop quickly before age five, and we help parents take advantage of this precious time. Since 2017, we have invited parents to enroll in our ParentPowered Text program, a free statewide texting program for parents of children ages birth to five. Each week, parents receive three texts geared toward their child's age and development.



★ **5,865 families** are enrolled in the ParentPowered Texts Program.

★ **764,308 text messages** were delivered on topics like literacy, math, science, problem-solving, and independence.

★ **The three most clicked resources** included content on equity that engages families on identifying personal bias, racial or otherwise, they may hold and pass on to their children.

★ **100% shared that the program increased** their confidence in supporting their children's learning.

Parent engagement is critical to supporting early learning and education outcomes. In addition to offering ParentPowered Texts, Think Small supports parents and child development and literacy through access to education resources from the Debra S. Fish Early Childhood Resource Library and Redleaf Press.



Growing Cultural Competence

We continued our internal progress on equity, supporting staff journeys in cultural competencies, and informing Think Small practices and policies. In partnership with Embracing Equity, we completed an internal equity audit that identified staff's desire for a deeper culture and sense of belonging. We made changes in our hiring processes and onboarding to cultivate connection. Teams use our Equity Toolkit – resources that advance personal development and culture change – to center equity in all we do. We trained three facilitators to lead Affinity Groups in the coming year while Think Small's STIR (Supporting Trust Inclusion and Respect) Committee coordinated all-staff sessions on understanding culture and identity.

Reaching Diverse Communities

Think Small targets outreach to communities in Minnesota's seven-county metro area wherein lies significant gaps in access to early care and childhood education for children, birth to age five. Think Small's outreach teams focus on priority populations – children of parents who are teens, part of foster care or child protection services, and experiencing homelessness. Building relationships with schools, community providers, government programs, shelters, and local communities is key.

Think Small outreach teams participated in nearly 50 community events and connected with 1,000 individuals. Staff met local child care providers to share professional development resources, grant opportunities, and resources to help build their child care businesses. We also provided important child care and scholarship information and early learning resources to parents who may not otherwise find the support they need. And this year, 40 percent of children receiving the 12,000 Early Learning Scholarships administered by Think Small identified as part of the priority population.



1,000 individuals connected to early care and education resources at Think Small events.

12,000 Early Learning Scholarships provided access to high-quality child care for families.



Advancing Equity

Minnesota's seven-county metro area is home to 68 percent of the state's children, ages birth to four years, and 72 percent of all young children of color. Think Small focuses on our youngest learners to ensure access to early learning and high-quality child care.

This past year, we supported families and providers in 17 different languages through Think Small's Language Access Line. 636 individuals were served through 1,359 unique connections by phone, virtual meetings, and in person.

We supported growing and sustaining quality family child care programs and child care centers through administering Minnesota Child Care Service Grants. This program provides valuable resources for program development and training, start-up funds for new licensed programs, or reimbursement for emergency expenses that compromise providers ability to care for the children they serve. More than 200 grants were awarded!



636 individuals were served through unique connections in their home language.



200 grants were awarded to child care providers to help sustain and grow their programs.

Fiscal Year 2024 Donors (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024)

With heartfelt gratitude,
we extend our deepest thanks
to the Think Small donors
whose generosity has helped
propel our success this year.
Your steadfast support has
touched the lives of thousands
of children and families, setting
them on paths to futures filled
with potential.

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