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Great Start Collaborative kicks off 2024-25 fiscal year with ambitious initiatives and family-focused projects

CHARLEVOIX - Each fall, the Great Start Collaborative & Family Coalition of Charlevoix, Emmet and Northern Antrim Counties takes time to review its previous year's accomplishments and map out what initiatives lie ahead to support families with young children in Northern Michigan.

Looking back at achievements and ahead to the future also provides an in-depth look at the reach of the collaborative into local communities and families in the 2.5-county service region. In 2023-24, the GSC:

- Partnered with 43 unique organizations and 8 parent members;
- Benefitted from 54 volunteers who provided 367 hours of service (a value of almost \$12,000);
- Provided 6 Family Adventures;
- Welcomed 17 caregivers to participate in the Family Coalition;
- Trained 36 community members in the Strengthening Families Protective Factors program;
- Received \$40,550 in funding from 7 foundations, philanthropists, and organizations;
- Collected 15,048 books in the FreeCycle program and distributed 17,160 books at 72 locations;
- Distributed monthly Talking is Teaching books to 666 area youth;
- Provided 17 children with preschool scholarships and participated with 5 programs in preschool placements;
- Updated the Family Resource Guide, with staff serving as Family Resource Coordinators for Help Me Grow Char-Em;
- Coordinated professional development for: Perinatal Mood Disorder Training (14 individuals); Infant Carriers for Preventative Health Equity (15 completed); 2 individuals completed Lactation Counselor training, Lamaze Childbirth Educator training, and When Survivors Give Birth training.

"When we look back at the prior year's accomplishments, it gives us all a sense of pride," said Savanah Cool, GSC Director. "When we are busy in the midst of the work, it can be easy to lose sight of the overall picture of the impact we know we are making in the lives of families with young children. Each of these efforts are part of the work we do every day to ensure children are born healthy, that children are healthy, thriving and developmentally on track from birth to third grade, that they are ready to succeed in school at the time of entry,

and that they are prepared to succeed in 4th grade and beyond by reading proficiently at the end of 3rd grade.”

Cool said the GSC’s role in supporting families through the early years of child rearing has tremendous benefits in the life of the child and their family.

“We know that if we can reach families where they are, with the support they need, children and their families benefit,” said Cool.

With the new fiscal year upon them, Cool explained some of the initiatives and goals set by the collaborative for 2024-25:

Outcome #1: Children are born healthy. The GSC will work to provide family resources and guides, provide doula support, and inform community members through an informative toolkit addressing perinatal substance use, from a harm reduction lens. Support will also be provided for the regional perinatal quality collaborative, Healthy Families America, and a local leadership home visiting group.

Outcome #2: Children are healthy, thriving, and developmentally on track from birth to 3rd grade. Support from the GSC toward this outcome will look like building WIC awareness and accessibility and affiliation with Help Me Grow Char-Em. The GSC will help coordinate developmental screenings, share family resources; enhance community integration of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors; and host Dads’ Coffee Connects.

Outcome #3: Children are developmentally ready to succeed in school at the time of school entry. Action items toward this outcome include a School Readiness Advisory Committee and development of a publication to guide families through the process and options for preschool enrollment. The GSC will also support the North Central Michigan College Child Care Initiative, as well as regional childcare planning and Great Start to Quality.

Outcome #4: Children are prepared to succeed in 4th grade and beyond by reading proficiently at the end of 3rd grade. Supporting reading initiatives remains a priority for GSC, including coordinating March is Reading Month family engagement activities; the Talking is Teaching campaign; FreeCycle book project; and additional family adventures. Supporting the Dolly Parton Imagination Library and Great Lakes Center for the Arts are additional ways of the GSC supporting reading.

“Having clearly defined goals and strategies helps us stay focused to ensure those four outcomes are made possible for all children in our region,” said Cool. “We look forward to another year of connecting with families and seeing children thrive in our caring communities.”

Learn more at www.greatstartcollaborative.org

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PHOTO CAPTION: Great Start Collaborative members gathered on Oct. 15th at NCMC to celebrate the successes of the last year while mapping out the work ahead to support local youth and families.