



The Basics in DeKalb County, Illinois

A CASE STUDY OF A TWO-PRONGED STRATEGY



**The
Basics**

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Prepared by The Basics, Inc.

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Executive Summary

DeKalb County, Illinois, is a rural-regional county of about 104,000 residents that has developed one of the country's most extensive community implementations of The Basics. This case study documents how The Basics DeKalb County built and adapted its implementation strategy over the course of a decade. The lessons identify aspects of the county's experience that are most likely to transfer to other communities, particularly rural and regional ones pursuing similar goals.

Background

The Basics model is a community-wide approach to early childhood development used by more than 60 communities in the U.S. and abroad. The core of the model, The Basics Principles, provides the science-based guidance for caregiving: Maximize Love, Manage Stress; Talk, Sing, and Point; Count, Group, and Compare; Explore through Movement and Play; and Read and Discuss Stories. The model is a public health approach, designed by the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University and launched in 2016 as a way to reduce racial and socioeconomic skill disparities that emerge in early childhood. Its relevance has only grown as national discourse focuses less narrowly on raising skills and closing gaps, and more on helping children from all backgrounds to flourish. The Basics, Inc. is the national organization, based in Boston, that leads The Basics Learning Network (BLN).

More than 100 DeKalb County partners across health care, libraries, faith communities, food assistance, schools, employers, and other sectors have incorporated The Basics model into their work with families. In ways that fit their missions, workflows, and family-engagement opportunities, these partners encourage parents and caregivers to use The Basics Principles. In addition, they share handouts, videos, and other learning resources, including Basics Insights: a free twice-weekly text messaging service with age-tailored facts and activity ideas for parents and caregivers tied to the Principles and available from birth through age 5. At any given time, parents of about 40% of DeKalb County children from birth to age 5 are enrolled in Basics Insights.

The Basics DeKalb County (TBDC) is hosted by the DeKalb County Regional Office of Education (ROE) where staff divide their time between The Basics and other programming. Some programming, for example, playgroups and community baby showers, integrate The Basics with other resources.

TBDC is a member of the multi-community Basics Learning Network (BLN). Some resources that TBDC shares with partners and families are produced by TBDC and its partners, while others, such as handouts, posters, tip sheets, videos, and the Basics Insights program, are offerings of The Basics, Inc.¹

Insights for Other Communities

The following insights from the DeKalb County case study may be helpful to other communities that are using The Basics model or preparing to do so.

- 1. Join forces with existing early-childhood stakeholders.** Before the community incorporated The Basics into the county's kindergarten efforts, a 2015 countywide civic-engagement survey helped launch a Kindergarten Readiness Working Group (KRWG) that built shared responsibility and trust among leaders and organizations committed to improving early childhood outcomes. The Basics framework and tools then gave stakeholders a collaborative strategy for

¹ Throughout this document, "The Basics" refers to the evidence-based early childhood framework, including its five Principles and implementation approach. "The Basics DeKalb County" refers to the DeKalb County initiative and staff responsible for implementing and supporting The Basics locally, across the county.

advancing a goal they had already adopted together. Leaders who bring The Basics to a community should identify stakeholders for whom early childhood development or kindergarten readiness is already a priority and work to join forces.

- 2. Anchor the backbone in an established institution with communitywide influence.** Housing the initiative in the DeKalb County Regional Office of Education (ROE) provided high-level access to county government officials, relationships with school district leaders, credibility with educators, and durability across leadership transitions and funding cycles.
- 3. Adapt implementation strategies to local needs and opportunities.** Consistent with The Basics core model, TBDC's primary strategy has been to engage a countywide network of family-serving organizations to integrate The Basics into their existing work. This multisector, communitywide approach supports broader adoption of The Basics by families across the community than any single organization could achieve alone. Over time, TBDC and the ROE added a second prong, because families were requesting options for deeper and more extensive engagement that did not yet exist. This second prong entailed Basics-infused programming that the TBDC and ROE would operate themselves: playgroups, community baby showers, and a system of gardens to engage families in lower-resourced parts of the county.
- 4. Treat Basics Insights text messaging enrollment as a target and embed the offering in the intake procedures that families already complete.** DeKalb County's high rate of enrollment in Basics Insights text messaging stems from setting an annual enrollment goal, attaching sign-up to existing WIC and case-management intake without requiring a separate visit, and assuming that a parent or caregiver wants to enroll, while providing them with the option to decline. Appendix A provides a step-by-step guide for Basics Insights enrollment based on the DeKalb experience.
- 5. Turn disruption into relationship-building.** During COVID-19, a diaper-distribution effort that TBDC staff organized as an emergency response to the pandemic put them in face-to-face contact with isolated families and key decision makers. These contacts seeded partnerships that endured, including a new church-run diaper bank that outlasted the funding. The experience illustrates how a prepared backbone can convert a crisis into lasting trust and engagement.
- 6. Leadership and coordinator support are non-substitutable inputs.** Structures, frameworks, and funding are necessary but not sufficient; the relational skill of coordinators, superintendents, and department directors is itself a driver of results. Communities should invest as deliberately in dedicated staff and leadership development as in program design. Leaders should also expect ebbs and flows, anticipate the need to re-energize partners periodically, and avoid regarding quieter phases as signs that the effort has stalled.

The Basics, Inc. supported this work through peer learning in the national Basics Learning Network, technical assistance, and resources for local backbones, partners, and families. Ultimately, however, DeKalb County's experience reflects the interaction of strong local conditions and thoughtful adaptation: civic mobilization created the foundation, institutional embedding provided infrastructure, a two-pronged strategy extended both reach and depth, and sustained local leadership kept the work moving forward.

I. Introduction:

The Kindergarten Readiness Working Group

DeKalb County is a *rural-regional area*—meaning a place outside of major metropolitan centers that encompasses both rural communities and a larger regional hub. The county is in northern Illinois and has roughly 104,000 residents across sixteen municipalities and surrounding rural areas.

The county has eight public school districts, a regional university (Northern Illinois University), and a mixed economic base encompassing agriculture, manufacturing, health care, and service-sector employment. While proximity to Chicago offers some advantages, the county has much in common with other rural-regional areas: limited public transportation, uneven access to early childhood services, and wide variation in family resources.

In 2015, a survey by the DeKalb County Community Foundation asked county residents which issues most needed collective action. Three priorities emerged—economic development, early education, and the arts.

In response, the Foundation established the Kindergarten Readiness Working Group (KRWG). Participants included educators, health professionals, and parents. To inform the work, researchers from Northern Illinois University provided data and analyses showing disparities aligned with income, geography, and access to early learning opportunities. Fewer than a third of children met kindergarten readiness benchmarks.

Based partly on the research and partly on personal experience, the head of the Community Foundation, the Superintendent of the Regional Office of Education (ROE), and a few others built consensus among KRWG participants that kindergarten readiness is a shared civic responsibility, not the job of a single agency or sector. This framing was the basis for explicit commitments that working group members made for ongoing involvement. It paved the way for integrating new tools and frameworks—including The Basics—into the work of existing organizations.

II. The McCormick Foundation and the Regional Office of Education

The Basics model was introduced in Illinois in December 2016 when the Robert R. McCormick Foundation invited The Basics founder Ron Ferguson to speak about the initiative to local and state leaders.

DeKalb County ROE Superintendent Amanda Christensen, one of the KRWG leaders, heard about Ferguson's presentation from an associate who had attended it and reached out to learn more. She had two reasons to be interested. Even if the KRWG had not existed, the ROE needed a kindergarten readiness strategy. But The Basics approach also aligned with the KRWG consensus regarding broadly shared responsibility. The five science-based Principles combined with the concept of socioecological saturation—meaning communitywide, multisectoral engagement in support of embedding the Principles into everyday life—provided a way to operationalize the KRWG's commitment to broadly shared responsibility for kindergarten readiness.

III. The Basics DeKalb County (TBDC) Backbone

Under Christensen's leadership, the ROE became the institutional home of TBDC in 2018 and appointed staff to oversee implementation of the model. Soon, TBDC had a full-time project coordinator supported by the McCormick Foundation and several other ROE staffers who devoted part of their time to The Basics, helping with outreach, partner support, fundraising, and social media.

One advantage of housing The Basics within the ROE was the opportunity to integrate it into existing countywide systems that connect families with services.

DeKalb County's Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) is one example of that integration. IRIS is a countywide referral network that enables organizations serving children and families to connect residents with community resources. The Basics has become one of the resources embedded within this broader ecosystem. Referrals to Basics Insights and other Basics-related activities now occur through multiple organizational pathways rather than through TBDC's staff outreach alone.

By 2024, DeKalb County Health Department referrals to register families for Basics Insights represented one of the most utilized pathways in the network. See Exhibit 1. The thickest pathway on the exhibit originates with the Community Navigator, a position housed at the ROE that supports organizations using IRIS and connects families directly to available services. Many of these referrals are to Basics Insights and, in some cases, TBDC playgroups.

TBDC's integration into IRIS reflects a broader implementation strategy. Rather than creating new infrastructure or parallel systems of support for implementing The Basics, TBDC worked with existing organizations and institutions to integrate The Basics into the ways they already served children and families.

Starting in 2019, TBDC staff provided Basics trainings for frontline professionals along with handouts and web-based resources to equip partner organizations for sharing The Basics Principles with families. This division of labor, with TBDC staff in the backbone role, allowed many organizations to contribute to the KRWG's shared goal.

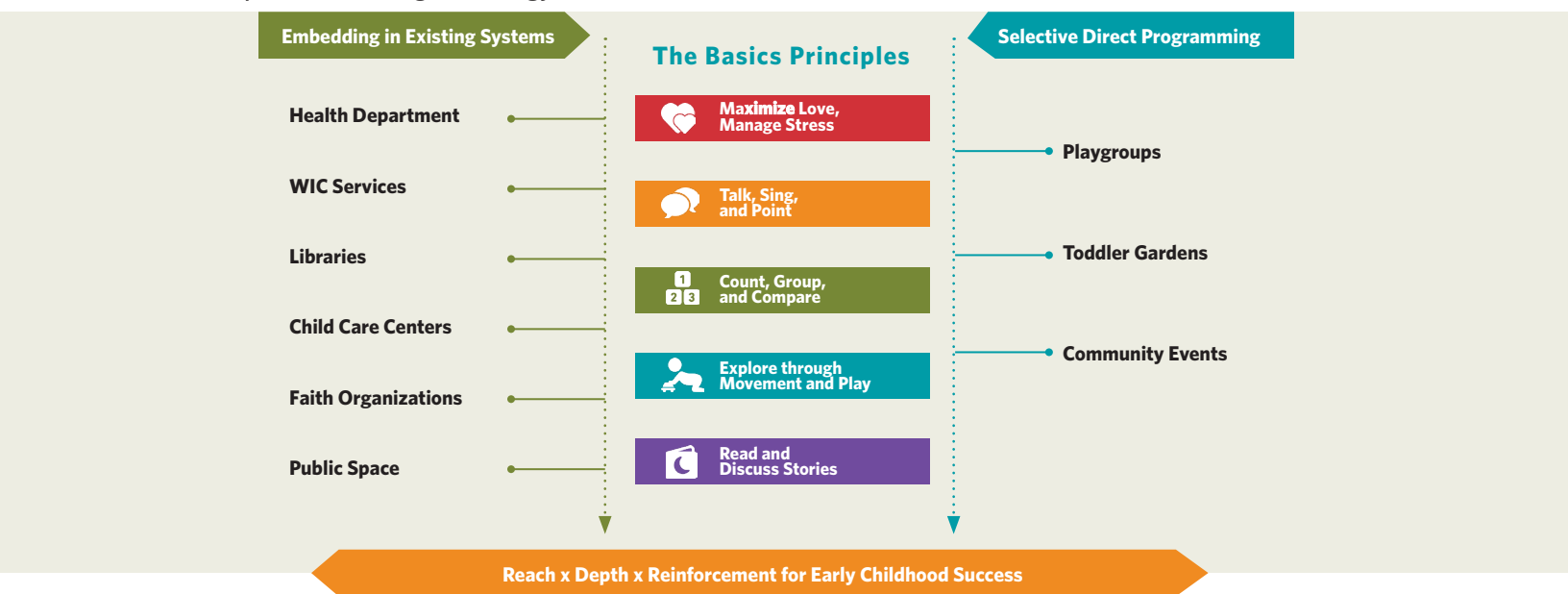
In addition, the success of the local initiative positioned the ROE and TBDC to play a leadership role in supporting other

IV. The Two-Pronged Implementation Strategy

The ROE's implementation strategy evolved into two prongs (Exhibit 2). The first prong focused on reaching families through trusted local partner organizations—health services, libraries, childcare providers, faith organizations, food distribution sites, and public spaces—so that families would encounter consistent messaging throughout the community. The Basics model refers to this as *socioecological saturation*. In other words, the goal is to create a *surround-sound* environment in which families experience support in multiple places for making The Basics Principles part of their everyday caregiving routines.

The second prong emerged later, in response to local needs and opportunities.

Exhibit 2 | The Two-Pronged Strategy



The First Prong: Partnering

Since 2019, TBDC has enlisted more than 100 partner organizations to help spread The Basics. They participate at varying levels, and more than 50 have received formal training from TBDC tailored to their staff.

TBDC has held hundreds of meetings with decision makers and staff at partner organizations to understand the workflows into which The Basics can be integrated and stays in touch to keep them motivated and equipped with information and materials.

The underlying premise is that every organization can play a role. The degree to which partner organizations integrate The Basics varies based on their mission, workflows, and opportunities to engage families. Partner involvement ranges from light-touch engagement, such as displaying posters and sharing information with families, to deeper forms of integration, including incorporating The Basics into routine conversations, modeling behaviors, intake procedures, and the services they already provide to families.

Because TBDC is located in the ROE and receives generous support from philanthropic organizations and other donors, including the McCormick Foundation, it has been able to provide resources free of charge to both partner organizations and families.

The Basics, Inc. administers an annual survey of frontline partner organizations. Local backbones, including TBDC, invite their partners to participate. Respondents from DeKalb County in early 2026 were from organizations in 13 sectors: Community Action Agency; Cross-Sector Collective Impact; Early Education and Care; Business; Faith-Based Organizations; Family and Pediatric Healthcare; Family Support; Food Assistance; Libraries; Local Government; Mental Health; School (K-12); Shelters.

Responses indicate that TBDC has changed how partners support early development. For each of The Basics Principles, more than three-quarters of respondents who work directly with families say they now discuss that Principle with families more than they did before The Basics initiative. And 95% percent of supervisors expect The Basics to remain part of how their organizations serve families.

In addition, partners are integrating The Basics into other programs. The survey asked respondents, “Does your organization include information about The Basics with any of the following programs/initiatives?”

From a drop-down menu listing nationally branded programs, each of the following was identified by one or more DeKalb County respondents.

- ACES/PACES
- Family Connects
- Learn the Signs Act Early
- Ages and Stages Questionnaire Administration
- First 1,000 Days
- Parents as Teachers
- Early Head Start
- Head Start
- Pyramid Model
- Healthy Families America
- Reach Out and Read

As TBDC began its work, the DeKalb County Health Department recognized the value of The Basics strategy as a practical way to strengthen everyday interactions with families. Under the leadership of Lisa Gonzalez, the department embraced The Basics as an organizational staple. Gonzalez made it a guiding expectation that “We do The Basics.”

Among the Health Department’s programs, TBDC staff work most closely with WIC and Family Case Management (FCM). The Basics is evident across other Health Department programs as well, in conversations, handouts, the Basics Insights enrollment process, on television screens in waiting areas, and on a large wall in the headquarters building, as shown in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3 | The Basics Wall at DeKalb County Health Department



COVID-19, The Basics, and the Launch of a Church-Based Diaper Bank

DeKalb County's progress appears to have been facilitated by a combination of favorable community conditions, strong existing partnerships, and the efforts of backbone staff to coordinate and support implementation across organizations.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced many organizations to suspend or modify in-person activities in 2020, the TBDC team at the ROE saw an opportunity hiding inside a crisis. Knowing that diapers—a necessity for families with young children—were not covered under WIC, SNAP, or other assistance programs, they secured grant funding to distribute diapers across the county.

"We got a grant and of course we're giving out diapers," recalls then Program Director Courtney Hill, "but our ultimate goal was to connect with families and with organizations—still during the shutdown."

The diaper distribution effort qualified as an essential service, giving Hill and her colleagues the authorization they needed to travel throughout the county and engage directly with parents. They also partnered with a local food pantry that remained operational as an essential service.

The timing proved fortuitous. Families who were isolated and seeking connection welcomed the sense of community that TBDC helped foster. In addition, decision makers at organizations that were harder to engage during busier times were now more available because everyone was on lockdown. The staff moved through the county repeatedly, building relationships that might have taken longer to develop under normal circumstances.

"We were all over this county multiple times a week, meeting families, meeting organizations," Hill says. "It was fantastic."

That was also around the time that The Basics, Inc. released its twice-weekly text messaging program, Basics Insights, for families with children under 3 years of age (it would later be expanded to include 3- to 5-year-olds). The diaper distribution project, by putting the TBDC team in face-to-face contact with families, provided a direct way to enroll families, even in the middle of a pandemic.

When COVID restrictions eventually lifted and diaper funding expired, the new partnerships and commitments remained. One church where the TBDC team had distributed diapers not only continued providing information about The Basics but also raised funds to continue supplying diapers to local families.

"They took over," Hill explains. "They made it a part of their organization." For that church, engagement with The Basics was a spark that kept on burning.

In recent years, staff at TBDC also reached out through the DCCYC and other local networks to identify, engage, equip, and train not only service-provider organizations, but also local employers.

For example, The Suter Company, a major employer in the county, provided financial support to the ROE for staffing and hosted lunch-and-learn sessions for its employees. The company regards early childhood development as a workforce well-being and human capital strategy, linking early development and kindergarten readiness to economic vitality.

The Second Prong: Selective Direct Programming

Around the county, partner organizations were integrating The Basics messaging and tools into their normal operations. But some families, especially in parts of the county with fewer resources, were asking for additional programming. They had ideas for ways to engage with The Basics that were not yet available.

In response, TBDC began offering Basics-oriented parent-child playgroups. They recruited through flyers, word of mouth, and channels that included elementary schools, childcare organizations, grocery store postings, social media, and other outlets. The playgroups were designed to strengthen parent confidence and deepen social connections, particularly among those who might feel isolated or uncertain in their parenting role.

Other direct programming takes place at Basics-themed toddler and community gardens and community baby showers. Both are contexts where families enjoy Basics-related activities, receive information, and register for Basics Insights text messaging. The baby showers are DCCYC events operated by the ROE and TBDC where, in addition to the Basics resources, families can get free clothing, diapers, and toys.

In addition, TBDC has distributed Basics-themed placemats to restaurants for children to draw on and installed family “Engagement Stations” at libraries, health clinics, early education sites and other locations. Each installation includes one or more tables and chairs where children can sit and enjoy books, learning materials, and toys evocative of The Basics Principles.

PLAYGROUPS: A RELATIONAL ANCHOR FOR DEEPER FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Basics-aligned playgroups have become a cornerstone of TBDC’s implementation. Developed by cross-walking existing playgroup curricula with Illinois kindergarten readiness standards, playgroups integrate Basics Principles through hands-on activities such as sensory play, art, movement, storytelling, and guided parent-child interaction.

In any given week, approximately 40–50 children participate, while cumulative participation since 2022 has included children and their parents from over 800 families. The program has created and strengthened relationships among parents, children, and facilitators.

From 2022 through the end of 2025, TBDC staff conducted 808 Basics-focused playgroup sessions at seven sites selected for their accessibility to families likely to benefit most. The program continues, but the data reported here extend only through 2025.

Each playgroup session ended with a feedback survey. Among 301 surveys completed by families attending playgroups in 2025, the following percentages selected the highest possible rating for each statement:

I believe that these playgroups help my child learn skills that will prepare them for kindergarten.	91%
I learned activities that I can do [at home] ...	82%
The playgroup gave me confidence ...	89%
My child and I felt welcome at the playgroup.	95%

In open responses, families describe playgroups as *fun, welcoming, educational, and deeply supportive*. Facilitators are praised for their warmth and creativity. Many parents report that they replicate activities at home.

Feedback has guided improvement, including an expanded selection of books, clearer communication with families about the alignment between playgroup activities and kindergarten readiness, and more intentional staff engagement with parents who participate less actively with their children or with other families during sessions.

For example, a parent provided the following feedback:

"... a few moms don't interact with their kids and use it as a social hour. And these same kiddos have taken things and hit my kiddo so it's been hard but not frequent. Just something to keep an eye on. Also, we love Nelly [the playgroup leader]."

Other frequently expressed reactions include:

Wonderful program! So appreciate the time it takes to plan and prepare for each week!
My child gets to do so many fun things I would have never thought of.

I love some of the ideas and I do try some at home :)

We truly enjoy this playgroup! We love the creativity! Keep up the great work.
We're looking forward to visiting the kids garden this summer!

My 20-month-old is enjoying making friends!

We love playgroup and all the fun activities we can also try at home! :)

Thank you for all the effort you put into the activities each week. We really appreciate the learning experiences.

TODDLER AND COMMUNITY GARDENS: THE BASICS IN PUBLIC SPACE

The request to develop toddler and community gardens focused on The Basics Principles came from community members.

The ROE placed the gardens on public property, including near subsidized housing. As Hill explained, "There were a number of regulatory hurdles to get over, but we worked our way through them."

The gardens are open to the public and host facilitated programming during the growing season in spaces partitioned for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Developed with master gardeners and community partners, the spaces include raised beds, sensory features, musical instruments, and Basics-aligned signage. Programming incorporates all five Basics Principles and often engages volunteers, strengthening social ties while making Basics-related ideas and activities part of everyday life.

The gardens are an example of how TBDC meets families where they are while connecting early childhood goals with other community priorities. Those located near high schools link early childhood development with youth workforce exposure.

Recognizing that maintenance—not installation—was the main barrier to sustainability, the ROE hired a dedicated garden coordinator to support the gardens' long-term success.

Exhibit 4 | Toddler and Community Gardens



V. Basics Insights: Countywide Reach, Twice Weekly

Text messages centered on The Basics Principles reinforce concepts families encounter through playgroups, community gardens, and other programming. They also provide timely prompts that reach families who may never attend in-person programming. Each week features one Principle addressed in two messages—a science-based fact and an activity idea—tailored to the child’s age and delivered from the time of enrollment through the child’s 5th birthday. Leaders in collaboration with The Basics, Inc. have begun exploring ways to measure the impact on kindergarten readiness.

While playgroups and gardens provide shared experiences and relational depth for hundreds of families, *Basics Insights* text messaging extends The Basics’ reach into everyday life among a few thousand across the county. TBDC has achieved unusually high penetration: the county has slightly more than 6,000 children from birth to age 5 at any given time, and the parents of 40% of them are enrolled in Basics Insights.

This level of penetration reflects a deliberate effort to make Basics Insights easy for families to learn about and enroll in. Rather than simply encouraging participation, TBDC establishes annual enrollment targets and actively monitors progress.

At TBDC-operated programs and events—a playgroup, a community garden activity, a baby shower—staff tell parents about Basics Insights and other available resources. Where appropriate, the opportunity to receive Basics Insights is incorporated into the registration or intake process, eliminating the need for a separate visit or enrollment activity. Staff explain the service and the enrollment process so families understand what they will receive and how to decline participation if they choose.

To equip them for enrolling families in Basics Insights, frontline staff are trained to explain the Basics Insights service to families and encouraged to enroll themselves so they can speak authentically, based on their own experiences, about the value of receiving messages.

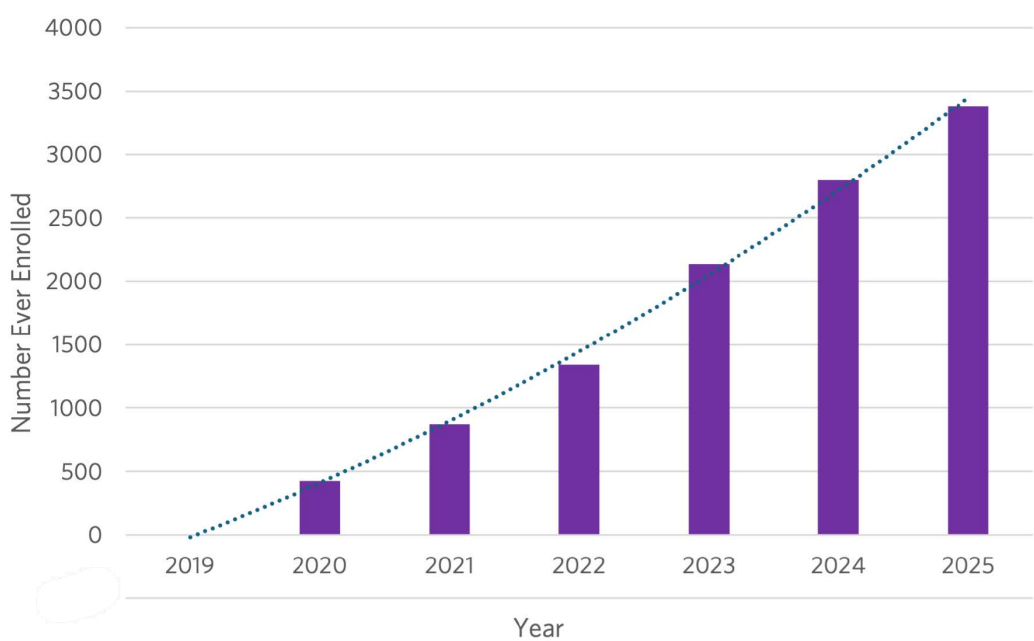
Beyond the programming that the ROE and TBDC operate, TBDC works with partner organizations to adapt the procedures for enrolling families in Basics Insights—including obtaining consent—to fit each organization’s policies, workflows, and circumstances. This flexibility has been particularly important in DeKalb County’s partnership with the Health Department. The Department has been pivotal in reaching large numbers of local families by incorporating Basics Insights into its intake and registration processes for WIC and FCM.

Exhibit 5 shows cumulative enrollment growth for the county from 2020 through the end of 2025.

Once families enroll in Basics Insights, they not only benefit directly—research indicates impacts on parenting behavior as well as child development—but they often encourage other families to enroll as well: 70% of DeKalb County respondents to a survey report that they speak with friends or relatives about the messages they receive.

For a more detailed discussion of the enrollment strategies that enabled TBDC to reach a large proportion of local families through Basics Insights, see Appendix A: Driving Basics Insights Enrollment.

Exhibit 5 | Growth in Basics Insights Enrollment
(Cumulative total enrolled)



VI. Managing Momentum Over Time

Christensen and Hill speak candidly about the ebb and flow of community work. Strategies for managing energy include streamlining meetings as work matures. Once roles are clear and partners understand how they contribute, less time is needed for coordination, allowing staff to focus their efforts where they have the greatest leverage. In addition, storytelling and celebration are important to re-energize partners.

Amanda Christensen described the ebbs and flows this way:

As a leader in education, my community called upon me to improve school and life success for our children starting at birth. I learned quickly that TBDC needed full-time, dedicated staff to make this initiative successful. Finding the right staff members and then supporting them through this adventure has been very rewarding.

We say that saturating a community with The Basics is a moral imperative because each child born deserves it. We must balance our enthusiasm with the reality that change management and collective impact take considerable time. But we’re making it happen!

Periods of excitement and active involvement at a partner organization may be followed by quieter phases due to competing demands or staffing changes. For example, engagement with The Basics at DeKalb Health Department declined sharply during COVID-19 and returned to a high level once the pandemic had passed. Rather than viewing such cycles as signs of setback, leaders see them as inherent to long-term sustainability and respond in ways that are patient and strategically calibrated to fit the circumstances.

VII. The Active Role of The Basics, Inc.

Courtney Hill emphasizes that while The Basics, Inc. has not operated programs in DeKalb County or directed local strategy, its role has been ongoing and consequential.

According to Hill, monthly Basics Learning Network meetings that The Basics, Inc. leads provide a national forum for peer-learning and problem-solving where she has received feedback on ideas, learned from other communities, and refined plans in real time. In addition, staff from The Basics, Inc. provided ongoing, responsive, on-call technical assistance, offering guidance on fidelity, messaging, tools, data, and emerging implementation challenges.

Equipped with these supports, however, local implementation remains firmly in local hands.

VIII. Conclusion: Keys to the DeKalb County Story

Four interlocking factors are core to the DeKalb County story.

- 1 Civic infrastructure matters for shared responsibility.**
DeKalb County's experience shows that existing civic infrastructure can support implementation by providing trusted relationships, shared commitments, and organizational capacity. Leaders bringing The Basics into a community should identify the civic assets already in place and engage them strategically.
- 2 Institutional embedding amplifies reach and durability.**
By working with existing institutions—including the Regional Office of Education, the DeKalb County Health Department, libraries, faith communities, and employer networks—to integrate The Basics into their ongoing work, The Basics DeKalb County extended the reach of consistent early childhood messaging far beyond what any single program could have achieved. At the same time, the work became anchored in institutions with longevity, credibility, and cross-sector convening authority. As the host organization for the backbone, the Regional Office of Education provided not only administrative and programmatic support, but also an institutional home that helped align partners and maintain continuity over time.
- 3 Reaching families through local partner organizations (the first prong) and direct-to-family programming delivered by the local backbone's own staff (the second prong) can be complementary approaches.**
TBDC's success reflects the intentional use of both approaches. Training partner organizations' staff to share The Basics Principles and materials helps achieve broad reach. At the same time, TBDC provides direct-to-family programming such as playgroups, toddler gardens, and community baby showers. These provide hands-on learning, behavioral modeling, and new social connections, which are particularly important for families that feel isolated.
- 4 Leadership quality is a non-substitutable input.**
Structures, frameworks, and funding are necessary but not sufficient conditions for change. The ability of key individuals to build trust, sustain partner energy, navigate bureaucratic complexity, and adapt strategy in real time is an important influence on implementation. DeKalb County's experience suggests that communities should attend just as carefully to leadership development and coordinator support as to program design.

Taken together, these four propositions trace the pathway by which DeKalb County achieved what it did. Civic mobilization prior to the arrival of The Basics created the preconditions, institutional embedding provided the infrastructure, and a two-pronged strategy delivered both reach and depth. Dedicated local leadership sustained it over time. The Basics Principles served as a common language while materials and technical support from The Basics, Inc. were important resources. But TBDC strategy itself was shaped by local priorities, partnerships, opportunities, and needs. Perhaps the most transferable lesson from DeKalb County is that successful implementation is not about reproducing another community's model. It is about starting with The Basics model and centering The Basics Principles, while thoughtfully and collaboratively tailoring implementation to local conditions.

Appendix A: Driving Basics Insights Enrollment

This appendix draws implementation lessons from DeKalb County's experience for backbone organizations and partners working to increase Basics Insights enrollment in their own communities.

The body of this case study describes what DeKalb County achieved on multiple dimensions. This appendix turns one aspect of that experience—enrolling families in Basics Insights—into a practical guide for other communities.

Note that this appendix reports on the methods that TBDC used and is not intended to be a definitive set of recommendations. Methods for securing Basics Insights enrollments will evolve over time in line with regulatory requirements for text message dissemination and lessons gleaned from experience.

This appendix begins with transferable lessons, then describes each enrollment channel before concluding with a quick reference for planning your own approach.

PART 1 . THE CORE MOVES

DeKalb's experience suggests six strategies that may be useful across enrollment channels and can be adapted to local circumstances.

- 1. Make enrollment a target, not an aspiration.** Set an explicit enrollment goal each year and treat it as a defined commitment—tracked, expected, and built into broader obligations such as grant deliverables. When numbers are targets rather than hopeful benchmarks, they shape how staff prioritize their time, how outreach is planned, and how progress is measured. They make enrollment a consistent focus.
- 2. Include enrollment with other intake procedures.** Rather than creating separate registration opportunities, introduce Basics Insights and secure consent from families for Basics Insights enrollment during other intake or enrollment processes that families are already attending to. This reduces the burden on providers and families alike.
- 3. Pair leadership mandates with support for frontline success.** A top-down directive from an executive to increase Basics Insights enrollment produces more results when staff receive preparation. Staff who directly support families need to understand what Basics Insights is, what it does, and the evidence behind it. Train frontline staff on Basics Insights specifically, separate from general Basics training, and encourage them to enroll to receive the texts themselves, so they can speak as trusted messengers in their own words rather than, for example, just handing over a flyer.
- 4. Bundle Basics Insights with other resources.** When hosting events or offering other supports, include Basics Insights as an additional benefit. TBDC offered Basics Insights to participants in the parent playgroups, community garden activities, and community baby showers. For families, Basics Insights was one component of a multi-resource package. Consent was required for Basics Insights registration, but families encountered it as one of several resources and benefits available through the program.
- 5. Meet families where they already are.** In communities where families are spread across a wide geographic area, outreach must be intentional and year-round. Attend events throughout the community, including those that serve broader audiences than just families with young children, to connect with caregivers where they already gather. Design your outreach to attract attention. For example, at a community event, set up an inviting, child-friendly table or booth with bright branding, welcoming staff, and hands-on activities that draw people in. When you speak about Basics Insights, be thoughtful about how you explain what it is and how you invite people to sign up. Make a warm, positive introduction, briefly explain what The Basics Principles and Basics Insights are, then say something like, “We think you’d love this. Want to sign up right now?” Invite grandparents and extended family members who care for a child to sign up too.

- 6. Invest time preparing partners before they operate on their own.** The early stages of working with a partner organization—relationship building, training, follow-up, and troubleshooting—take real effort on both sides. But that groundwork pays off: a well-embedded process is eventually sustained with only minor support, with partner staff identifying and connecting families on their own, freeing your team to direct its energies elsewhere. This applies not just to Basics Insights enrollment, but also to other aspects of engagement, such as preparing partners to encourage families and remind them to make the Principles routine.

PART 2 . HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

TBDC reaches families with Basics Insights through three distinct approaches: embedding enrollment within a partner's existing workflow, embedding enrollment within its own programs and events, and conducting proactive community outreach.

CHANNEL A | Partner with an existing high-volume service provider

Why this channel. High-volume providers that already serve your priority population offer the broadest, most durable reach. In DeKalb County, the Health Department's Maternal and Child Health Services division houses WIC, Family Case Management (serving pregnant women and children under one year old on Medicaid), and pediatric immunizations. Together they reach an estimated 50% of the county's youngest children and screen for income, making the division a natural access point for priority families.

What must be true first. Executive-level commitment and a working relationship must be in place. DeKalb County's partnership began in 2019 with a directive from the Health Department director making incorporation of The Basics Principles into departmental workflows a core expectation. By the time Basics Insights launched in 2020, that directive and the working relationships with staff in the division were already in place.

How to set it up and run it. Work directly with a program coordinator to embed enrollment into existing intake procedures. Provide training specific to Basics Insights to both supervisory and frontline staff and invite them to enroll themselves so they can speak about the service firsthand.

The ongoing mechanics. When a family comes in for WIC, Family Case Management, or vaccinations, staff introduce Basics Insights as a free resource that provides twice-weekly, age-based text messages to support children's early development. Families who are interested may choose to enroll at that time. Enrollment information is then securely shared with TBDC through an internal referral process and periodically to the Basics Insights registration portal using its secure bulk upload functionality.

Results. After significant upfront investment in relationship-building, staff training, and workflow integration, the enrollment process has become a routine part of Health Department operations, generating approximately 25 referrals per month for Basics Insights. Staff routinely identify and connect eligible families during their interactions with caregivers.

CHANNEL B | Embed into your own programs and events

Why this channel. When the backbone operates programming, it can reach families who may never pass through a partner's intake. DeKalb County does this in two settings.

Parent playgroups. Basics Insights is integrated into the playgroup curriculum and discussing the messages families receive is included as part of the program experience. Registration materials clearly explain that participating families will be enrolled to receive the text messages unless they choose at the time of enrollment to decline participation.

Community baby shower (reaching hard-to-reach families). The DCCYC's annual baby shower, hosted by the backbone (the Regional Office of Education), is designed for families who are hard to reach—those who don't typically attend community programs, are new to the area, may distrust local organizations, or are first-time parents unaware of available resources. Social-service organizations connect with families directly while high-need items such as diapers, car seats, strollers, and cribs are distributed. Enrollment is offered during event registration the same way it is for playgroups. The event reaches more than 125 families a year, many of whom had not previously been in contact with the backbone.

Constraints to know. Where Basics Insights is an integrated component of a program, enrollment can be incorporated into the registration process, provided families are clearly informed about what they will receive and have a simple and transparent way to decline participation. The specific approach should always reflect the policies and procedures of the organization and the mechanisms available for obtaining and communicating consent.

CHANNEL C | Proactive community outreach

Why this channel. In rural or geographically dispersed communities, families are spread unevenly and child-focused events may not exist in smaller towns. Going to families directly is sometimes the only point of access.

What must be true first. A commitment to treat outreach as intentional, expected, and year-round, rather than something done only when staff have spare bandwidth.

How to set it up and run it. Attend events across every part of the target area, including general community events not designed for young families. Set up a warm, inviting, Basics-branded table: bright visuals; swag such as water bottles, bubbles, and books; hands-on activities such as sensory bins and large wooden blocks; and art that signals children are welcome. Occasional raffles can reward on-the-spot enrollment. When families approach, ask whether they have young children in their lives, not only at home—ask about grandchildren, young relatives, or children of friends or neighbors, not only children in the attendee's household—then introduce The Basics and pivot quickly to Basics Insights as a free, research-backed resource.

Constraints to know. Outreach is staff-time intensive and yields one family at a time.

PART 3 . QUICK REFERENCE

Use this table to quickly understand the strengths and requirements of each channel, then use the checklist to plan your own rollout.

Channel	Typical Reach	Setup Effort	Consent and Enrollment Mode	Key Precondition
Partner service provider	High and ongoing	High upfront, lower ongoing effort to sustain	Adapted to rules and procedures of the partner organization	Executive mandate plus an existing relationship; partner already serves your priority families
Your own programs and events	Moderate and targeted	Moderate	Bundled as part of the enrollment process	You control the programs and can manage the process with families
Proactive community outreach	Lower, one family at a time	Ongoing and staff-intensive	On-the-spot, one at a time	A year-round commitment and a presence where families already gather

A starting checklist

1. Set an explicit annual enrollment target and build it into your commitments.
2. Identify high-volume partners that already serve your priority population.
3. Secure an executive-level commitment and invest in the relationship before launch.
4. Map where enrollment can attach to existing intake, eliminating any duplicate form or visit.
5. Train frontline staff on Basics Insights specifically and have them enroll themselves.
6. Match the enrollment process to the requirements governing each setting and ensure that any required consent is informed, affirmative, and documented.
7. Build enrollment into your own programs and events.
8. Commit to year-round outreach, and design both your event presence and the ask.
9. Plan for an upfront investment of time with each partner organization before their engagement with families around The Basics and Basics Insights. Later the partnering relationship should require only routine maintenance.

Appendix B | Logic Model

INPUTS What is invested	ACTIVITIES What is done	OUTPUTS What is produced	IMPACTS What changes
Philanthropic & Public Funding McCormick Foundation grants; one-time federal grant secured by Congresswoman Lauren Underwood; in-kind institutional support from the ROE; other philanthropic support Institutional Backbone DeKalb County ROE provides countywide coordination, credibility, and convening authority; ROE superintendent provides strategic leadership. ROE also provides dedicated staffing and funding to support direct-to-parent initiatives Skilled Local Leadership Dedicated program coordinators provide relational skill, cross-sector credibility, and day-to-day implementation capacity National Framework & Support The Basics, Inc. provides the five-Principle research-based framework, online toolkit, monthly Basics Learning Network (BLN) convenings, and on-call technical assistance on fidelity, messaging, and data	Partner Outreach & Embedding Train partner organizations across multiple sectors to integrate The Basics into their services; install Engagement Stations at libraries, clinics, and gardens Family Text Messaging Enroll families in Basics Insights twice-weekly text messaging through Health Department and partner channels; refine enrollment practices to improve penetration and survey response rates Playgroups & Baby Showers Conduct weekly Basics-aligned playgroup sessions at 7 sites across the county; integrate activities aligned with Illinois kindergarten readiness standards; Conduct community baby showers Toddler Gardens Build and maintain publicly accessible outdoor learning spaces with raised beds, sensory features, musical instruments, and Basics-aligned signage; fund a dedicated garden coordinator to ensure sustainability Data Collection and Review Conduct BLN surveys. Survey participants of direct-to-parent programming. Review and apply findings from survey reports	Partner Engagement 100+ organizations across 13 sectors have actively embedded The Basics; 95% expect The Basics to remain part of their ongoing practice; 11 nationally branded programs integrated with The Basics messaging Population-Level Reach Approximately 40% of children aged birth-to-5 at any given time have a parent enrolled in Basics Insights text messaging—a notably high level of participation. 70% of text recipients share Basics messages with friends or relatives Direct Family Programming 808 playgroup sessions conducted; approximately 800 families served; 95% of families report feeling welcome; Toddler Gardens operating at multiple sites including near subsidized housing, with high school linkages for workforce exposure Sustained Community Infrastructure A church-based diaper bank launched during COVID-19 became an ongoing community resource; employer partners (e.g., The Suter Company) integrate Basics messaging into workforce well-being; DeKalb County leads The Basics Illinois multi-community network	Short-Term: Provider Uptake Partner organizations report talking with families more about all five Basics Principles (77%–83% report increased conversations) Short-Term: Caregiver Knowledge and Confidence Parents gain awareness of The Basics Principles and confidence in applying them; 89% of playgroup families report increased parenting confidence; survey responses from Basics Insights users indicate they learn new things about caregiving Medium-Term: Changed Caregiving Behaviors 82% of playgroup attendees report they learn activities they replicate at home; comparisons of baseline and follow-up Basics Insights surveys show increases in Basics-related caregiving behaviors Long-Term: Progress on Kindergarten Readiness 91% of playgroup families believe participation helps prepare their children for kindergarten; research using The Basics Parental Assessment of Child Developmental Status finds effects on precursors to kindergarten readiness Systems-Level: A Durable Early Childhood Ecosystem A stronger multisector early childhood ecosystem has increased the likelihood that Basics messaging and related activities can continue, with adaptations in response to changing local circumstances



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