

think **small**



2023  
Annual Report

# Opening Letter from Barb & Tanya

Dear Friends of Think Small,

As we end our fiscal year, we do so with hearts brimming with excitement, gratitude, and yes, a healthy dose of determination. This year brought unprecedented promise for Minnesota's youngest children, thanks to historic advances in early childhood legislation and a deep commitment to building a brighter future for all.

At the heart of this transformation stands Think Small, an organization deeply woven into the fabric of our state's early learning landscape. For decades, we've been pioneers in innovation, unwavering advocates for families, and champions of quality care. But 2023 felt different. It felt like a turning point.

This year, Minnesota's investment in early childhood represents a paradigm shift from historical investments. Think Small's tireless advocacy efforts were instrumental in securing funding increases and key reforms to three programs we administer: Early Learning Scholarships, Parent Aware, and the Child Care Assistance programs.

Our commitment is centered on what we do best—evidence-based programs that empower parents and nurture high-quality care. In 2023, we connected with over 40,000 families from underserved communities, provided crucial support through the ParentPowered Text Program, and developed equity-focused resources that impacted thousands. These numbers aren't just statistics; they're stories of empowered parents and thriving children.

And let's not forget the silent heroes – the dedicated early childhood educators who shape young minds each day. Through the Think Small Institute, we provided nearly 4,000 hours of training focused on meeting the needs of historically underserved populations, equipping educators with the tools and knowledge to create nurturing environments for all children.

We celebrate the incredible progress we've made, while acknowledging the work that lies ahead. The child care crisis won't be solved overnight. But with your support, our unwavering commitment, and the newfound momentum in Minnesota's early childhood landscape, we can get on the right track.

Together, we can build a future where every child, regardless of background or circumstance, has the opportunity to thrive. Thank you for being a part of this journey.

With deepest gratitude,



*Barbara Yates*

**Barbara Yates**  
President and Chief  
Executive Officer



*Tanya Skogerboe*

**Tanya Skogerboe**  
Chairwoman of  
the Board

## Historic advances in Early Childhood Legislation

The 2023 legislative session ended with a tremendous \$2 billion in new investment aimed at bettering the lives of Minnesota's youngest citizens and with the adoption of an early care and education policy framework that in many ways institutionalizes the Parent Aware Ratings and Early Learning Scholarship programs. In short, it is a brand-new day in Minnesota's early care and learning world and Think Small is committed to seizing that day by bringing its strengths in innovation, advocacy, and parent engagement to bear on all the important discussions and decisions yet to be had and made.

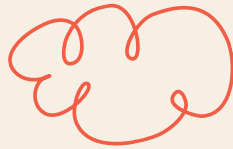
Over the next five years as state government is implementing the policies and investments recently passed and the Legislature is fine-tuning things, Think Small will focus on tipping the balance to the side of what works best and away from the kind of status quo thinking that has resulted in Minnesota having some of the worst disparities in educational outcomes in the nation. Our goals are clear and simple: empower parents, ensure quality, and demand transparency and accountability for outcomes. We believe this focus can create an early education sector that genuinely works for its most important stakeholders – the children.

# Innovation & Advocacy Fund

The Think Small Board of Directors launched a special “Innovation and Advocacy Fund.”

The goals of the fund are to rebuild the struggling child care sector with quality options and to magnify the voices of parents of young children to ensure that their needs are well reflected in state policies and considered a high priority for investment. This work will take place over the next few years and we are dedicated to raising significant additional funds to carry out our planned activities.

Think Small, has for decades been recognized in the child care sector for developing innovative approaches, such as initiatives for increasing the number of new child care programs and the online professional development platform Think Small Institute. Many of the innovations developed have impacted families and children in all corners of Minnesota and beyond. Think Small is also a proven and respected leader in the advocacy space and is well positioned as an implementer of key programs to help steer the state’s policies toward approaches that center the needs of children and families.



## Evidence of Effectiveness and Accomplishments

### Parent Engagement

We have long prioritized early childhood learning that engages and empowers parents while also providing them with options. We know from our experience and research that parent engagement can be challenging, but we are seeing promising results and success in our work.

- Made over 40,000 high-touch connections supporting parents, families, and early educators, many of whom are from historically underserved communities, including low-income populations, English Language Learners (ELL), communities of color, and immigrant and refugee families in FY2023.



- Engaged 7,600 families with children ages 0-5 in the ParentPowered Text Program, a research-based curriculum covering topics including literacy, math, science, problem solving, and independence, in the 2022-23 school year.
- Developed a series of equity-focused texts in response to the murder of George Floyd. Texts are disseminated monthly; one of these messages was among the top clicked resources that Think Small provides in 2022-23.
- Following are findings from 1,584 parents who were surveyed about their experience with the ParentPowered Text Program:

**98%** said the program helped their children learn and grow.

**98%** said the program helped improve their relationship with their children.

**98%** said the program helped them feel supported as a parent.

## Policy and Advocacy

The following were accomplished during the 2023 legislative session during which Think Small united stakeholders, provided thought leadership, and organized grassroots support behind the agenda which ultimately passed.



From the first day of attending school...their child care has allowed these girls (her two foster children) some sort of **stabilization in their lives**. I feel this is extremely important for them due to the previous trauma they've experienced before coming to my home. This scholarship has made **positive impacts for our family**. When I pick the girls from day care they're so excited to tell me about their day. This **warms my heart** to know that going to school brings them such a sense of normalcy to their young lives.

**Temphy Thompson**

Scholarship recipient foster parent

- Changed Early Learning Scholarship policies to expand eligibility, cover the cost of care in the Metro area, and further target resources to children with highest need, including children whose parents are chemically dependent, receiving mental health treatment, incarcerated, and/or experiencing domestic violence.
- Enacted key reform to Parent Aware designed to increase participation by smoothing entry into the quality improvement process.
- Established a reform framework that will ultimately align the state's Child Care Assistance Program (\$300 million per year) to Early Learning Scholarship policy principles: tie to quality, reduce barriers for parents, and ensure continuity for children.
- Secured funding and mandate for universal kindergarten entry assessment.

## Early Care and Education Quality

Think Small has made significant progress in improving quality in large part through best in class professional development, consultation, and coaching opportunities focused on the essential elements of quality care and increased offerings via Think Small Institute.

- Maintained the overall percentage of and child care programs in the 7-county metro while growing the percentage of 3- or 4-Star rated slots in licensed center- and home-based child care programs from 48% in 2020 to 52% in 2023, despite a record number of program closures over the last two years.
- Provided nearly 4,000 hours of training focused on meeting the needs of historically underserved populations to over 1,000 individuals via the Think Small Institute.
- Supported 2,000 early childhood educators who prepare an estimated 20,000 children for kindergarten via the Think Small Institute.

## Early Care and Education Access

Our access work is focused on the Early Learning Scholarship program, which we administer in Hennepin and Ramsey counties. The data provided is for State Fiscal Year 2022.

- Focused outreach and recruitment efforts on statutory priority groups and successfully awarded 78% of Scholarships in Hennepin and Ramsey counties to children in the following at-risk categories: homeless, foster care, child protection, teen parent.
- Prioritized meeting the needs of BIPOC communities and successfully awarded 82% of Think Small-administered Scholarships to recipient children who identify as BIPOC.

# Think Small Institute

In just its second year of operation, Think Small Institute has established our place in the ECE workforce by creating and delivering high-quality professional development. Think Small Institute serves educators in Minnesota, but also across the county. Our professional development is designed for a national audience and multidisciplinary professionals.

The following is course enrollment information for 2023:

103

CDA bundle enrollments

451

Instructor Led Training (ILT) enrollments

2,159

Partner (Cypherworx profit-share) eLearning enrollments

186

TSI exclusive eLearning enrollments

2,814

Total 2023 course enrollments

TSI launched seven eLearning courses:

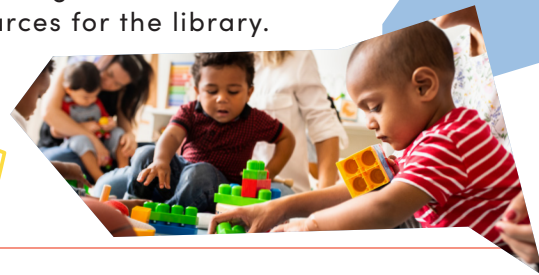
- Building Your Team (2 hours)
- From Hurting to Healing: Creating Trauma-Sensitive and Healing-Centered Early Childhood Programs (12 hours)
- From Hurting to Healing: Creating Trauma-Sensitive and Healing-Centered Family Child Care Programs (10 hours)
- Hidden Hazards in the Home (2 hours)
- Teaching Off Trail (2 hours)
- Overcoming Teacher Burnout in Early Childhood: Exploring Advanced Strategies (2 hours)
- Overcoming Teacher Burnout in Early Childhood: Strategies for Change (2 hours)

Four Instructor-Led Trainings were developed, along with a Training of Trainers event held in June. Sixteen Minnesota-approved trainers attended. Those trainers have four more courses to offer educators in Minnesota.

- Courageous Conversations: Discussing a Child's Development with Family
- Designing for Diversity: Creating Social-Emotional Spaces that Reflect Children's Lives
- Interventions for Preventing Suspensions and Expulsions Through Behavioral Observation and Documentation
- Lacing, Tracing, and Erasing: Fine Motor Skill Development and Early Childhood

## Library:

The Debra S. Fish Library received funding from DHS to pilot a resource hub project linking children's librarians with Wayfinder navigators and ECE resources to promote capacity building in non-Greater Twin Cities metro communities. Child Care Wayfinder is a one-stop navigation network for starting and growing child care programs in Minnesota. Wayfinder provides personalized support and resources to help early childhood educators gain the skills necessary to run effective programs. Partner library systems included Two Harbors, International Falls, Duluth, and St. Cloud. A digital toolkit was started that includes or will include information about the Wayfinder program, Parent Aware ratings and processes, and promoting literacy with young children, a roadmap for selecting books with diversity and for specific thematic units, and more. The funding of this project allowed for participation in the Minnesota Library Association conference and the purchase of sturdy containers for transporting/lending materials as well as additional resources for the library.



## Embracing Equity Within

Think Small leaders continue to deepen their commitment to “championing policies and practices that empower a just, inclusive, and equitable early childhood care and education system.” Over thirty white/white-presenting and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) staff leaders gathered in quarterly affinity group meetings, with the goal of advancing Think Small’s anti-racist organizational development. These groups were co-facilitated by nine staff leader peers who guided participants through a time of discovery, exploration, reflection, and healing as they explored their racial identities and discussed topics of interest.

“Personally, I am a parent to two young white boys, and I am always trying to **expand my knowledge** so I can raise them to be allies and antiracists and to use their privilege and power for good, so spaces like this are important for my learning. Professionally, doing this internal work helps me work with authors; with white authors who aren’t very far along in an antiracist journey I can help them interrogate their work (and also white authors who are doing this work... **we all need additional perspectives**); with BIPOC authors, since I am doing internal work myself I hope that I am placing less burden on them when we work together (and also bring another perspective as we all miss things from time to time).

**Melissa York**

Senior Editor for Redleaf Press

Work has also been underway to create a **new Equity Onboarding Toolkit**. Throughout the year, leaders throughout the organization reviewed the toolkit in learning communities and discussed how to use the tool with their teams. This toolkit will support a shared understanding of our organization’s commitment to equity and will provide current and new staff leaders with tangible resources and action steps to strengthen the work they do everyday to support families and early childhood educators. The toolkit will be available to all staff leaders in 2024.

Think Small’s partnership with the nationally renowned organization, **Embracing Equity** continues with the involvement of 3 Think Small leaders; Theresa Collins, Marie Huey, and Ellaine Miller. The yearlong residency, beginning in August of 2023, included an invitation for staff leaders to participate in another organization-wide equity assessment, which provided insight into our growth as an agency and new opportunities for development. As we prepare for the year ahead, we look forward to building upon the successes we have achieved.



## Fiscal Year 2023 Donors

**With profound appreciation,** we acknowledge the Think Small donors who played a vital role in our accomplishments this year. Your unwavering support directly fueled the positive trajectory of thousands of children and their families, empowering them to step confidently into a future brimming with potential.

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