thinksmall



Meeting the Moment. Creating Momentum.

ANNUAL REPORT 2026

Mission

Think Small's mission is to advance quality care and education for children in their crucial years.

Vision

We envision a time when economic and achievement gaps are closed and every child is ready for kindergarten, ultimately realizing their full potential.



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Letter from the Chair and President/CEO

Meeting the Moment. Creating Momentum.

This year was a defining one for Minnesota's early childhood ecosystem. At a time when children, families, and educators needed stability and support, the systems they rely on faced growing uncertainty. Federal funding threats, Operation Metro Surge, and increased scrutiny tested an already fragile early care and education landscape. Families continued to struggle to find and afford care, while educators navigated mounting pressures and complex requirements.

Yet throughout these challenges, we witnessed something equally powerful: the determination of educators, families, and community partners to keep moving forward. Again and again, we saw people step forward, find solutions, and remain focused on what matters most: helping children thrive.

In moments like this, resilience sparks momentum. We find a way.

At Think Small, that meant staying close to the people at the center of this work and ensuring their experiences guided our decisions. We launched the WeVision Initiative, convening educators, providers, and families to help shape a more effective future for licensing and quality improvement in Minnesota. We also amplified educator and family voices through our Child Care Stability Survey, equipping policymakers with timely insights into the pressures facing early childhood programs and the families they serve.

Even amid these challenges, meaningful progress continued. This year, we helped connect more than 800 additional children with Early Learning Scholarships and quality early learning opportunities while continuing to administer thousands more scholarships in Hennepin and Ramsey counties. We also supported the opening of more than 1,000 child care slots in Twin Cities communities facing significant barriers to access.

These successes remind us what is possible when educators, families, communities, and partners work together. Thank you for helping us meet this moment. Together, we are building momentum toward a future where every child in Minnesota can access the quality early learning experiences that give them the strongest start in school.



Jaylon Rosenblum
Chair of the Board



Cisa Keller
President and Chief Executive Officer

Meeting the Moment. Investing in Educators.

Early childhood educators are the foundation of Minnesota's early care and education system. This year, they faced growing challenges, from threats of funding loss to ongoing workforce and business pressures. Yet they continued showing up every day for children and families in their care.

When educators succeed, children thrive. That's why Think Small invests in educators through coaching, professional development, financial and business supports, and resources that help them start, grow, and sustain thriving child care programs. By supporting educators who make early learning possible, we're helping more children get the strongest start in school.

35,332
Professional development enrollments

83,935
Redleaf Press products sold nationwide and around the world



4,883
Educator connections supporting child care business start-up and growth



Think Small Institute Selected to Expand Access to Professional Development Statewide

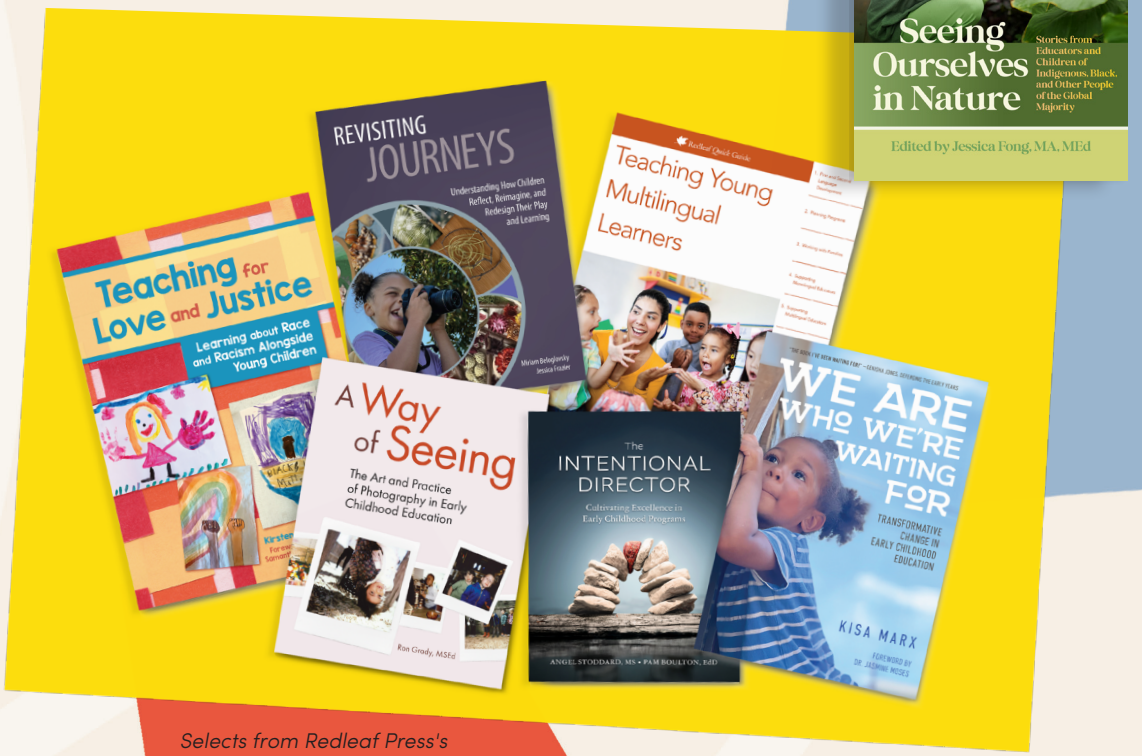
Think Small Institute extended its reach this year after being selected by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families to deliver professional development for early educators beyond the seven-county Twin Cities metro. The expansion helps more educators access the training needed to meet health and safety requirements and strengthen the quality of care they provide. Think Small also became the training provider supporting educators across 20 counties in southern Minnesota. As demand grew, professional development enrollments increased 64 percent over the previous year.

think small INSTITUTE

Redleaf Press Advances the Early Childhood Profession

This year, Redleaf Press released 10 new titles designed to support and inspire early childhood educators. Among them was *Seeing Ourselves in Nature* which earned an Independent Book Publishers Association (IBPA) Gold Award in the Black/African American Communities category for elevating voices and perspectives that are often underrepresented in the field. *The Redleaf Calendar-Keeper* also continued to be a trusted business resource for family child care providers, selling more than 10,000 copies.





Selects from Redleaf Press's FY26 new releases! See the full catalog at redleafpress.org

Danielle's Story: Growing Strong Identities from the Very Beginning

Danielle has spent much of her life caring for children. As an older sibling, educator, and later a mother, she developed a deep belief that the earliest years shape how children learn, build relationships, and understand themselves.

"When I had my own children, I realized a deeper responsibility," she says. "An accountability to steward their lives and steward it well."

As she cared for her children and pursued a Montessori certification, Danielle became increasingly convinced that every child deserves learning experiences tailored to their unique strengths, interests, and needs.

With support from Think Small's Wayfinder Program, Danielle turned that vision into a licensed family child care program. Coaching, training, and guidance through the licensing process helped her navigate the practical steps of starting a business. More importantly, her coach helped her find the confidence to move forward.

"What I had to develop to actually start the program was the courage," Danielle says.



Today, Danielle serves seven children in a program built around meaningful relationships and individualized learning. She wants children to grow up knowing their stories, experiences, and identities matter. "I would like children to leave the program we're building with strong identities and relevant skills for the world in which they live"."

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Meeting the Moment. Centering Families and Communities.

The strongest early childhood education systems are built with families and communities, not just for them. It means listening to their experiences, learning from their perspectives, and ensuring their voices help shape the future of early care and education. This year, those voices helped elevate the challenges families and educators face while informing conversations about how to better support children across Minnesota.

Child Care Stability Survey Elevates Educator Voices

As immigration enforcement actions disrupted communities across Minnesota, many child care providers found themselves navigating new challenges alongside the families they serve. To better understand the impact, Think Small surveyed more than 300 early educators across the seven-county metro area. Their responses revealed a system already under strain experiencing unexpected program closures, declining enrollment, and increased child absences. The findings elevated educators' voices in discussions about policies affecting children, families, and early learning programs.



Hundreds of Early Learning Scholarships Awarded Despite Funding Challenges

For thousands of Minnesota families, an Early Learning Scholarship can open the door to high-quality early learning and child care. Despite funding challenges, Think Small helped connect 816 additional children in Hennepin and Ramsey counties with scholarships this year, giving more families access to opportunities that help children arrive ready for kindergarten.

Family Perspectives Inform Future Solutions for Early Care and Education

The future of early care and education should be shaped by the families it serves. Think Small brought together families from diverse communities across Minnesota to share their experiences, challenges, and hopes for their young children. Their perspectives are helping inform conversations with partners and policymakers as Minnesota works toward a more accessible, responsive, and high-quality early learning system.



*Circumstances include, but are not limited to, homelessness, foster care, domestic violence, and other traumatic or challenging experiences.

Mirakle's Story: A Scholarship Opens the Door to Kindergarten Readiness

When Latasha became a mother, she was navigating challenges she never expected. Living on disability income and raising Mirakle on her own, she became her daughter's fiercest advocate.



When Mirakle was about 18 months old, Latasha noticed developmental delays and began seeking support. Referrals led to speech therapy, occupational therapy, developmental assessments, and other resources. Through Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ), she also learned about a braided NAZ Scholarship and Early Learning Scholarship administered by Think Small. The scholarship made it possible for Mirakle to attend a high-quality early learning program that became part of a growing circle of support. "I wouldn't have had the finances to afford child care without the scholarship," says Latasha.

Her child care teachers worked closely with Latasha, therapists, and specialists to support Mirakle's growth and development. Over the next several years, Mirakle made steady progress, building communication skills and reaching important developmental milestones. Latasha describes Mirakle as a natural leader who comforts classmates when they are having a difficult day.

"Think Small, St. David's, NAZ, her child care program, all of them played a part in helping raise her," says Latasha.

While Mirakle was learning and growing, Latasha was able to return to a goal she once thought was out of reach: earning her GED. Latasha is just a few tests away from earning her diploma, and Mirakle entered kindergarten this fall excited and ready to learn.

> These programs are gems, even when you're done, they're still there for you.

Meeting the Moment. Leading Systems Change.

Meaningful progress in early care and education depends on solutions that work across the entire system to better serve children. Through research, innovation, advocacy, and community engagement, Think Small is helping shape solutions that strengthen early learning in Minnesota.



Think Small staff show up for Advocacy for Children Day at the Capitol.

WeVision Minnesota Reimagines the Future of Early Learning

Think Small led a six-month effort that brought educators, families, and community leaders together to develop recommendations for improving child care licensing, strengthening quality recognition, and better support of early learning programs. Among the recommendations is the creation of a Minnesota Board of Early Care and Education, giving those most directly impacted by the system a stronger voice in shaping its future.



Pilot Aims to Simplify Access to Child Care and Public Benefits

With support from Goodman Philanthropies, Think Small partnered with Mirza and Lakes and Prairies Community Action Partnership to launch a pilot in northwestern Minnesota testing a simpler way to connect families with child care and public benefits. By streamlining how families apply for benefits and how administrators determine eligibility, the pilot aims to help families access the full range of support available to them.



1,043
New child care slots supported in Twin Cities communities with the greatest barriers to access

7,289
People engaged through advocacy and policy outreach

New Pilot
Modernizing access to Minnesota child care and public benefits

Today's Life: A Second Home for Children and Families

A framed photo of former students and a poem titled "A Second Home" hang above Director Roberta Root's desk at Today's Life School and Child Care in Eden Prairie.



For Roberta and Tamara Donsoy, creating that sense of belonging starts with consistency. Years ago, they developed their own curriculum to ensure children receive high-quality learning experiences from infancy through pre-K, regardless of classroom or teacher. Today, the accredited curriculum provides a clear progression for learning and development. Their commitment to quality led them to Think Small through Parent Aware. Through coaching with Quality Coach Astra Lowery, teachers receive hands-on guidance that helps refine their practices and strengthen everyday interactions with children.

"It's always helpful to have that extra set of eyes," says Roberta. "Someone who can come in, observe, and help us grow."

The partnership also helps connect families to Early Learning Scholarships, making high-quality early learning more accessible. Today, more than 25 children at Today's Life are supported through scholarships and county assistance.

"It allows people in the community to have better opportunities than they might have otherwise," says Tamara. "The children who really need it, this gives them access to that quality."

That commitment to access is now driving Today's Life's expansion. A new center opening in Eagan will help meet the growing demand for quality child care.

Former students return to visit, families stay in touch, and the impact continues long after children leave.

> Family, family, family.
> That's what we are.

Meeting the Moment. Creating Momentum, Together.

We extend our deepest thanks to Think Small donors whose steadfast commitment powered momentum this year. Your unwavering support helped us be there for early educators and the families and children who depend on them the most.

Celebrating 20 Years of the Minnesota Model of Early Learning

At an event hosted at Rise Early Learning Center, Think Small joined business, civic, and early childhood leaders to celebrate 20 years of Minnesota's Model of Early Learning. The vision and investment of leaders unlocked roughly $1 billion in public funding, giving an estimated 100,000 Minnesota children and their families greater access to quality early learning. Two cornerstone initiatives, Early Learning Scholarships and Parent Aware, continue today. As we reflected on two decades of progress, we also looked ahead to the next chapter of ensuring every child enters kindergarten ready to learn.



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(July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026)

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