Executive Project Summary (submitted Fall 2024)

The City Schools of Decatur (CSD) is embarking on a new initiative to establish a best-in-class early learning center. This facility will provide access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) for local families, addressing the critical need for early learning services in Decatur. The center is projected to open by 2027, offering a comprehensive program model that supports children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, while equipping families with essential resources for engagement and success. CSD has identified the lot adjacent to the Central Office as the best location for this endeavor. This land is owned by CSD; it was specifically required to be used for educational purposes in its sale. It is also located directly across from the Decatur Housing Authority. Launching a new early childhood learning center is embedded within CSD's 2023-2028 Strategic Plan under Organizational Effectiveness and Excellence; it is also aligned with the district's charter contract with the state, which emphasizes embedding the science of reading in instruction as well as developing an innovative CTAE pathway for teacher preparation.

This summary serves as an essential resource to guide district leadership and partners through the critical considerations and planning steps necessary to bring this initiative to fruition. It includes targeted recommendations drawn from current research and community insights to inform decision-making. However, while these recommendations provide a framework for success, it is ultimately up to the school district leadership to evaluate these options and determine the most effective path forward. By prioritizing underserved groups, this project aligns with CSD's commitment to fostering ***all*** student success, nurturing an inclusive culture, and building organizational excellence, while also supporting long-term community growth and stability.

Why invest in a new early learning facility for CSD?

Investing in a new early learning facility for the City Schools of Decatur is not only essential for our students' future but also for the long-term success of our community. CSD has an opportunity to expand the early learning programming provided at College Heights by reaching farther into the community to meet the needs of *ALL* families within the district. **Decatur currently faces several challenges: nearly 14% of students are economically disadvantaged, and 77% of these students scored below proficient in the 2023 English Language Arts (ELA) Milestones, compared to 21% of other students.**

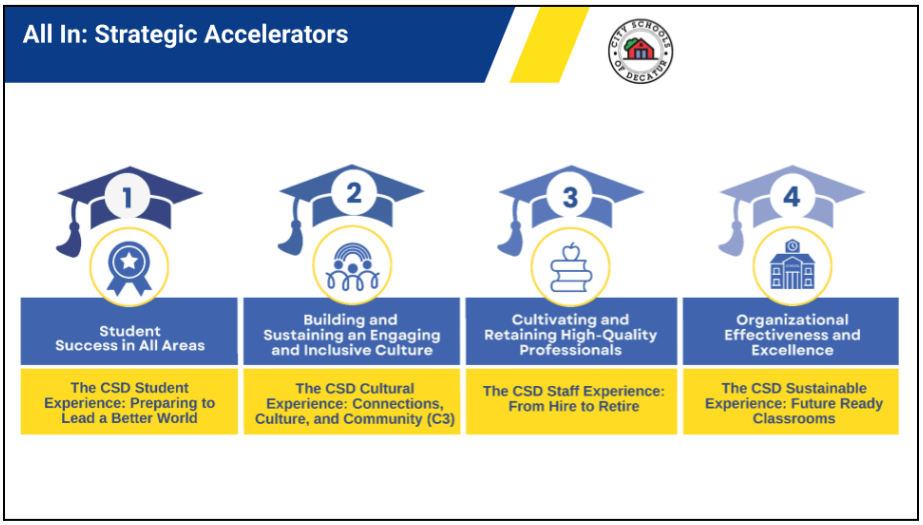
Research consistently shows that high-quality early childhood education has significant long-term benefits. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman's research found that **every $1 invested in quality early childhood programs yields returns between $4 and $16**. With strong evidence supporting the efficacy of early childhood education, **this investment is not only in the children of today but in Decatur's future workforce and economy.**

Who will we serve?

The new early learning facility will primarily serve low-income families in Decatur, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged or face barriers such as limited access to transportation or affordable child care options. **Recent survey data shows that 75% of respondents from the Decatur community report they have faced challenges accessing an early childhood education program, citing cost and availability as major barriers**.

This facility will prioritize families who are currently underserved, including those from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Families who speak languages other than English at home, such as French, Vietnamese and Arabic, will benefit from tailored services designed to meet their specific needs.

Connection to Strategic Accelerators



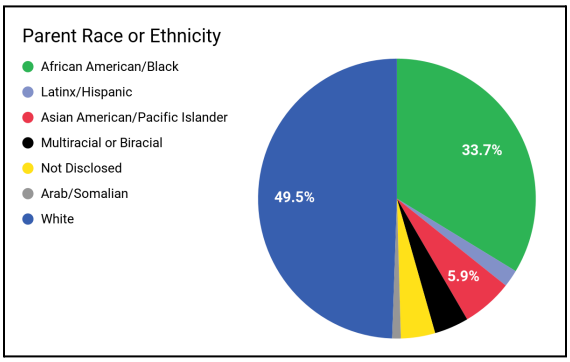
The early learning facility aligns directly with CSD's four strategic accelerators. Within the Strategic Plan, it is linked to Organizational Effectiveness and Excellence, serving as a key target to ensure Future Ready Classrooms that are sustainable and support the overall effectiveness of the district. The facility is also linked to the three other accelerators:

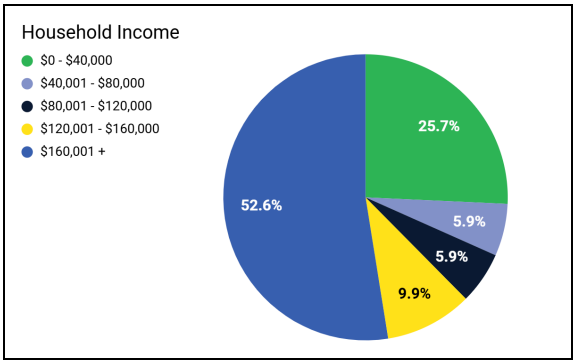
- **Student Success in All Areas:** The ultimate goal of the facility is to set students on a path toward academic, social, and emotional success, starting from birth. High quality early learning experiences, while not a silver bullet, have a proven impact on long term academic success and wellbeing.
- **Building and Sustaining an Engaging and Inclusive Culture:** Part of the motivation for this project is ensuring access to early learning for children for whom it is currently out of reach; this facility is designed to be accessible to CSD's low-income housing and families all across the district in need of additional options. Additionally, the facility will create an environment that fosters inclusivity and belonging, ensuring all children feel supported in their educational journey.
- **Cultivating and Retaining Quality Professionals:** Workforce impacts stemming from this center will be significant. First, hiring and retaining top-tier early childhood educators will be a cornerstone of the facility's success, ensuring high-quality instruction and care. Additionally, educators will have access to childcare at the facility, allowing for convenient and more accessible care for their children, which is a key retention strategy. Finally, the Teaching as a Career CTAE pathway will be a core part of the design and implementation of the early learning program.

Insight from Families and Community Members | What We Learned

The City Schools of Decatur's early childhood education initiative seeks to address the diverse needs of its families, particularly those residing in public housing. A recent survey conducted in partnership with the Decatur Housing Authority offers key insights.

Demographics: The majority of the 100 survey respondents identify as female, with most participants aged between 16 and 44. The racial and ethnic backgrounds of respondents reflect the city's diversity, including African American, White, and Asian American/Pacific Islander families.

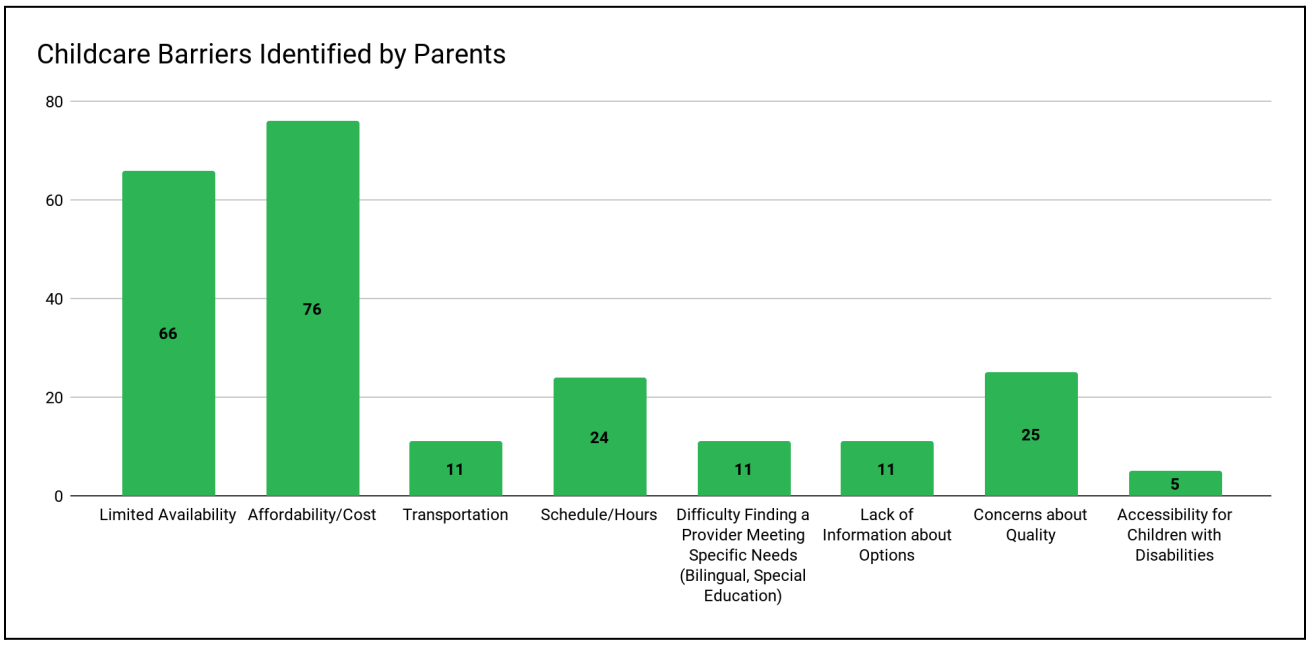




Linguistic Diversity: While a large portion of families speak only English at home, there is a notable presence of families speaking additional languages, such as Amharic and Vietnamese. These linguistic differences may impact equitable access to early childhood services and highlight the need for culturally and linguistically responsive programming.

Access to Child Care: A substantial number of respondents indicated that they do not currently have their children enrolled in any early learning programs, often citing the high cost of child care as the primary obstacle. This lack of access to early childhood education further underscores the necessity for expanding affordable and high-quality services. There were several survey participants who indicated significant economic hardship, including homelessness, further emphasizing the need for affordable, accessible child care in the local community.

Economic Challenges: Many families report financial limitations, with household incomes ranging widely from under $40,000 to over $160,000 annually. Notably, several respondents expressed that child care costs are a significant burden, with a willingness to pay varying from $1-250 to upwards of $1,500 per month.



These insights highlight the importance of creating an inclusive and financially accessible early learning center, designed to meet the unique needs of economically disadvantaged families and those facing language and housing challenges. The new facility must focus on reducing financial barriers, increasing engagement from diverse families, and offering programming that supports multilingual learners.

Recommended Next Steps:

This is a multi-faceted and complex project that requires engagement across a broad range of stakeholders and teams. As the district continues to move this project forward, we encourage intentional planning and strategic focus on the following key areas:

- *Internal Communications:* It will be critical to ensure that there is a thoughtful approach to communications with both internal and external stakeholders. Internally, this should include a regular cadence of meetings with key stakeholders, a decision log, and set of regularly updated talking points and/or FAQ. This will help ensure that all district leaders are aware of key decision points and can communicate effectively about progress. There should also be regular communication with the broader district staff community to ensure that educators, leaders and other key stakeholders are included in the planning process and can effectively communicate project goals and status.

- *External Communications:* A communications plan for the broader Decatur community is also important. This should include both one-way communication (i.e. updates) and two-way communications (i.e. listening sessions and forums) throughout the process, focused on different elements of program planning and design, such as the physical building, program specifics (e.g. hours and services), curriculum selection, and more. The district team should anticipate common questions and challenging topics and develop robust FAQs and communications guidance to ensure an aligned and targeted message. The district team should also identify community champions who can help communicate project goals and intended impact to the broader community.

- *Approach to Financing:* Securing financing for both the capital and ongoing operational costs presents a valuable opportunity to develop solutions that will ensure the long-term success of this project. The building costs, while still being finalized, are expected to exceed $12 million, while the annual operational costs are likely to be between $1-$1.5 million in the first years, rising over time due to inflation and salary increases. Both financial needs must be addressed with thoughtful planning and the engagement of a broad range of partners.

    a. *Capital:* There are several options that can be explored to raise capital funds, including financing options and loans, philanthropic support, a bond, or leveraging SPLOST funds. The viability of each of these options needs further exploration, and then a clear plan for funding should be developed.
    b. *Operational:* This will be a significant ongoing need. The district should pursue ongoing funding options from the business and philanthropic community, explore the possibility of allocating district funding to support this project, and continue to pursue state and federal funding streams like Head Start and Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS). Without a clear plan for ensuring operational funding stability, there is a risk that the center would end up serving largely families who can afford care, rather than the low-income children that CSD intends to reach.

- *Program Model:* There will be many decisions to be made about the programming and staffing needed to support the Early Learning Center in its goals of serving all children, and particularly low-income Decatur students. CSD can leverage the lessons learned from the Frasier Center and the College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center to support thoughtful decision-making. A few of the most critical elements include selecting a culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate curriculum, ensuring adequate staffing and support for the unique needs of the intended population, and planning for robust recruitment and parent engagement. Additionally,

based on family survey results, we know that the hours and days of operation will be a critical consideration in access for many families; CSD will need to determine what supports can be offered to families needing non traditional care. Finally, the district will need to thoughtfully implement differentiated fees including a full, market-rate pay option, a scholarship option, and a discounted staff rate.

- *Selection of Architectural and Construction Expertise:* The selection of the team who will design and build the early learning center is a critical step in this project. It will be important to be thoughtful about both the process and the individual vendors selected. For example, careful thought should be given to the use of a design-build firm vs. individual architecture and construction firms; additionally, the selection process should be carefully designed to ensure costs are low, project timelines are manageable, and stakeholders are aligned. The individual vendors should have ample early learning experience, have a proven track record of working with school districts, and understand CSD's vision and needs.

- *Consideration of Alternate Pathways:* Establishing a new early learning center requires broad support and financial investment from diverse partners. In order to build community trust in the transparency and efficacy of the district's strategy, CSD should ensure it has fully evaluated all alternative pathways that advance fiscal sustainability and can articulate the rationale for the pathway chosen. Alternatives for consideration, as well as some highlighted pros and cons, are captured here:

1. *CSD should consider all viable and available sites for an early learning center.*
    a. *Key Pros:* There is interest in maintaining the current proposed site as green space which can be used by the entire community. A new early learning center at that site would reduce access to that space.
    b. *Key Cons:* This is the only CSD-owned site that is within walking distance of the Decatur Housing Authority. It is also the only CSD-owned site that is currently vacant. Any other site would require significant investment (e.g. purchasing new land) or transformation (e.g. closing a school and relocating students), and would likely pose a transportation barrier. Additionally, the selected space, part of the footprint of Beacon Hill, holds particular meaning for the CSD community, which seeks to fulfill a promise to that legacy.

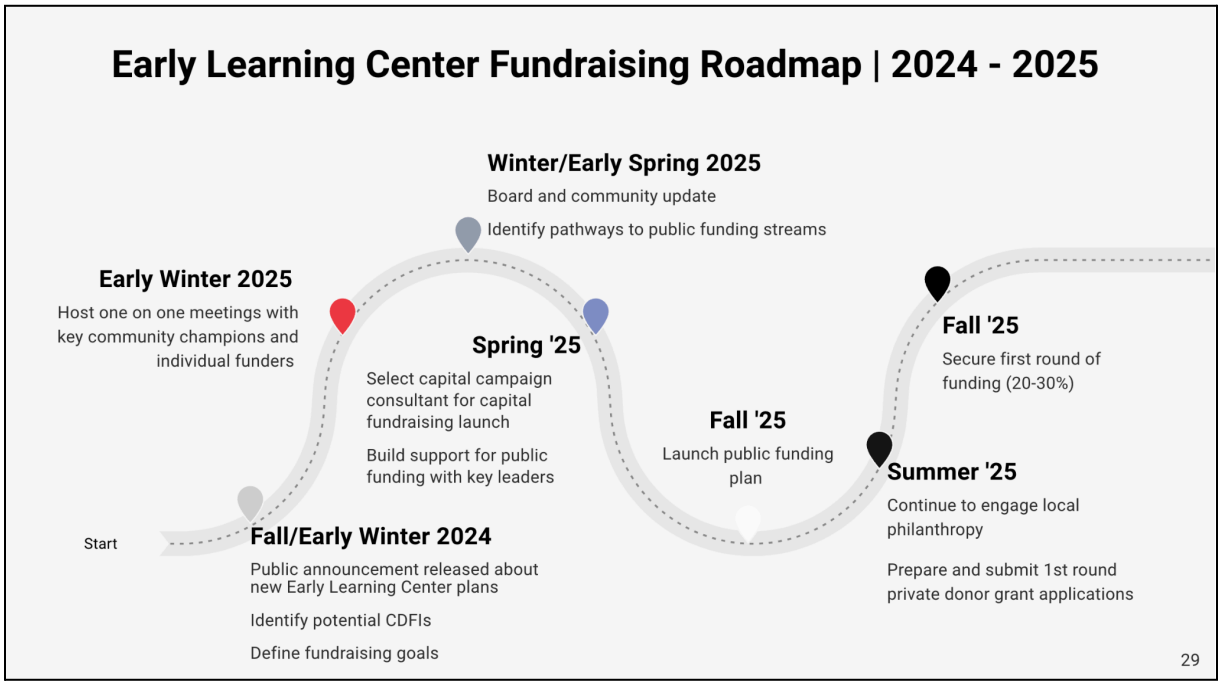
2. *Expanding capacity at College Heights while addressing transportation barriers through parent stipends or contracts.*
    a. *Key Pros*: If CSD is able to leverage some of the existing space at College Heights, it could reduce the capital funds needed and allow for a focus on raising ongoing and sustainable operational funds. While identifying a transportation solution - whether parental stipends to offset transportation costs or a contracted solution - may be challenging, the costs may still be less.
    b. *Key Cons*: Transportation and distance are currently key barriers for families living at DHA to access care at College Heights; even if transportation solutions are identified, families may still feel the location is too far for their comfort. Additionally, few early learning providers offer transportation for very young children because of the liability and logistical concerns.

3. *Establish early learning partnerships with local child care providers with a district led professional learning program, offering contracted slots to CSD eligible families sponsored by district funds.*
    a. *Key Pros:* This option would limit the financial and capacity cost borne by CSD to provide care directly to children, as well as alleviating the capital needs. It would also bolster local early learning providers.

b. *Key Cons:* There are currently only eight licensed and Quality-Rated centers within 5 miles of the DHA, one of the target communities for this project, the closest of which is approximately a half mile away. None of these offer transportation, which would remain a barrier, as discussed above. CSD would also have very limited control of curriculum and staffing relative to a directly-run program. Additionally, childcare for staff might be less accessible, which could impact retention. Finally, an additional focal point of this center is the inclusion of CTAE education pathway, which would be more challenging with an external partner.

4. *Partnering with an external early learning operator to manage and possibly build the center, with CSD as a ground lessor and securing contracted slots for CSD families.*
   a. *Key Pros:* Partnering with an external operator could reduce the financial costs and capacity needs on both the operational and capital front, depending on the contract terms negotiated. An experienced provider with a robust track record of building, opening, and operating centers could provide consistent quality while taking on much of the burden of navigating fundraising and operational concerns.
   b. *Key Cons:* With College Heights and the Frasier Center, CSD has developed its own track record for early learning. The district has developed a brand which is trusted among parents; a new operator may not be able to harness community enthusiasm or support. Additionally, while CSD would be able to vet the contracted operator in advance, as well as build quality checks into any agreement, it would still have more limited control over curriculum and staff quality. It might also lose alignment between early learning and K-12 instruction as a result.

The Road to an 2027 Opening

Fundraising Milestones for 2024-2025

Fundraising for the new early learning center will require intentional engagement with a diverse group of community champions and private philanthropic funders. We recommend initiating communication and outreach to potential donors within the next 30-60 days. With a significant capital fundraising goal, CSD will need to secure financial support from a broad range of sources, including public funding opportunities. This roadmap is based on current context; as partnerships emerge and the program model is solidified, this timeline may need to be updated.