Early Care & Education Focus Area

A thriving community begins with access: to opportunity, to care, and to education. In Isabella County, ensuring every child and young adult has the support they need to grow, learn, and succeed is both a moral responsibility and an economic necessity. From a child's earliest years through their transition into adulthood, the Mt. Pleasant Area Community Foundation is committed to strengthening the full continuum in education from early care through post-secondary success. This work helps families find stability, supports a strong local economy, and lays the foundation for a more resilient and equitable future for all.

Lifelong success begins well before kindergarten. Yet a lack of quality, reliable, affordable child care is a significant challenge for families across the community. When care is unavailable, unaffordable or limited in early language development support, it directly affects future literacy and educational success along with parents' ability, especially mothers', to work, pursue education, or maintain consistent employment. These limitations have broad economic consequences, impacting local businesses, schools, and the region's long-term prosperity. The Community Foundation has been convening local partners to expand access and improve early learning environments. Investing in early care supports children's development and gives families the tools they need to thrive.

As children grow, the need for support continues. Many young people in Isabella County face limited opportunities to continue their education beyond high school. Without clear, supported pathways to degrees or trade certificates and licenses, students often miss out on stable careers and long-term financial security. The Foundation can expand the work it already does through grant-making to address these challenges through scholarships and partnerships that promote enrollment, persistence, and completion. These efforts not only strengthen individual futures but also contribute to a more skilled workforce and a healthier, more vibrant local economy.

By investing in both early childhood care and postsecondary success, the Foundation is advancing a shared vision for Isabella County—one where every person has the opportunity to reach their full potential. These efforts support families, strengthen the economy, and improve quality of life across the entire community.

HOW WE GOT HERE

As part of its early strategic planning, the Mt. Pleasant Area Community Foundation gathered both data and community input to better understand needs and opportunities in Isabella County. This included public data, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and a cross-sector survey of local leaders. Insights were organized using a framework adapted from the OECD's Better Life Index, with a focus on four key areas: early care and education, basic needs and economy, health, and community engagement.

A BRIGHT START: EARLY CARE/EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



Community leaders ranked early childhood education, the start of the education continuum, among the top community education investment priorities for residents living above the poverty line, closely followed by K-12 education quality and early childhood education quality. This finding was reinforced by other feedback where leaders ranked early childhood education as the top priority for investment in education for all residents.

EARLY EDUCATION CHALLENGES: CHILD CARE DESERTS AND INFLEXIBLE HOURS

2 OUT OF 3 ZIP codes in Isabella County are classified as child care deserts or limited access areas, meaning 2 to 3+ children compete for every available seat.

32% of Michigan parents with young children have experienced changes to their own employment situation due to childcare issues.

Community leaders described early childhood access as a pressing issue, noting long waitlists, limited provider availability, and inflexible hours for working families, especially those in healthcare, education, and tribal employment.

AFFORDABILITY AND ASSISTANCE ISSUES

19% of a typical Isabella County household's income is consumed by childcare – well above the federal affordability benchmark of 7%.

ONLY 48 % of eligible families in Isabella County use the Child Development and Care (CDC) Scholarship with the complexity of the process.

The average cost of child care in Isabella County is $9,000 per child.

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EARLY GAPS CAN TURN INTO PERSISTENT ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES

ONLY 32 % or fewer children under age five are enrolled in formal early childhood programs leaving a majority without access to structured developmental support.



90% of brain development occurs before age five. Children without access to high-quality early learning are significantly more likely to begin kindergarten behind in literacy and social-emotional skills—and many never catch up.



30% of 3rd-8th graders in the Gratiot-Isabella RESD were proficient or advanced in Math in the 23-24 school year, according to M-STEP data. The MI state average was 35.6%.

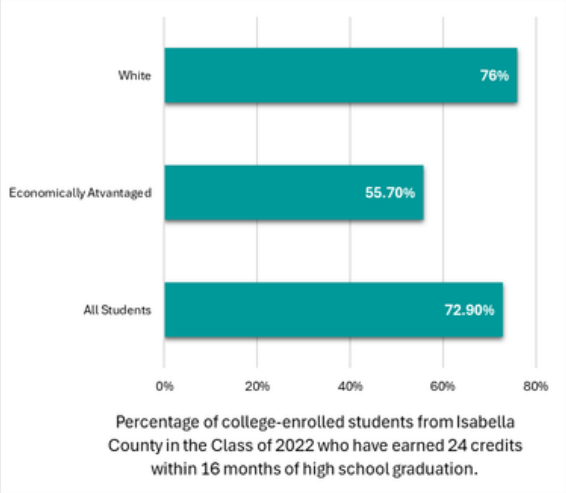
35.2% of 3rd-8th graders in the Gratiot-Isabella RESD were proficient or advanced in ELA in the 23-24 school year, according to M-STEP data. The MI state average was 40.5%.

CERTIFICATES AND DEGREES OPEN DOORS TO LOCAL OPPORTUNITY

$28K MORE dollars are earned annually by graduates with Bachelor's degrees than high school diplomas only.

Certificates also offer a strong return on investment, with entry-level and mid-career wages reaching 80–85% of bachelor's degree earnings. Certificates come at a lower cost and shorter time to complete than degrees. In Isabella County, certificate programs in fields like healthcare, IT, manufacturing, and early education help residents access well-paying local jobs while bridging critical workforce gaps. But in Isabella County, postsecondary hurdles exist.

ISABELLA COUNTY PERSISTENCE AND ATTAINMENT



Percentage of college-enrolled students from Isabella County in the Class of 2022 who have earned 24 credits within 16 months of high school graduation.

64.9% of students from the Isabella County high school graduating class of 2023 enrolled in college within 12 months.

39.7% of Isabella County graduates completed their degree (certificate, associate's, or bachelor's degree) within six years of enrollment.

ONLY 42.3% of Isabella County's working-age residents have a postsecondary certificate or degree.

BARRIERS AND INSIGHTS



While the top professions in Isabella County are Educational Services (16% of all workers), Health Care & Social Assistance (13%), and Accommodation & Food Services (12%), Isabella County still needs more middle- and high-skill job opportunities to retain certified and degreed talent.

The average one-year cost of tuition and fees for public, 4-year institutions in Michigan was $14,718, which is about $5,000 more than the national average in the 2022-2023 school year.

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