

II. Background

The mission of the John Rex Endowment is to support an environment where children and families in greater Wake County can live healthy lives. In 2013, the John Rex Endowment released a five-year plan Our Plan for Impact, 2013 – 2018. Within its Mental Health, Social and Emotional Well-Being funding area, is a focus on achieving this goal:

Develop and enhance the contribution of Wake County children’s places and spaces to the positive mental health of children.

In September 2013, the John Rex Endowment released a Special Request for Proposals (RFP) to identify a grant partner to conduct a research and planning project related to the work.

The RFP outlined the following three strategies for accomplishing this work:

1. Research evidence-based standards and guidelines related to the people, policies, practices, programs, and physical elements in children’s places and spaces.
2. Develop and/or adapt quality improvement tools aimed at the people, policies, practices, programs, and physical elements in children’s places and spaces.
3. Develop an integrated plan guided by Wake County stakeholders that develops and enhances through various strategies the contributions of children’s places and spaces to the positive mental health of Wake County children by:
 - Supporting activities that foster learning and commitment related to the role of children’s places and spaces in promoting children’s positive mental health.
 - Promoting evidence-based standards and guidelines related to the people, policies, practices, programs, and physical elements in children’s places and spaces.
 - Implementing quality-improvement pilot projects that focus on the people, policies, practices, programs, or physical elements in children’s places and spaces.
 - Sharing success stories and learning related to quality improvement activities and projects in Wake County children’s places and spaces.
 - Encouraging advocacy for local or state policies that promote high-quality standards in children’s places and spaces.

Of particular importance is the John Rex Endowment’s interest in developing an Integrated Plan not only for the John Rex Endowment’s consideration in its grant making activities, but also to serve as a blueprint for action for other funders in Wake County, for policymakers, and for providers and practitioners. In fact, because of the universal nature of the Best Practice Indicators and the focus on customizing to setting, many of the strategies are easily transferable to other communities and contexts.

Furthermore, the Integrated Plan reflects certain priorities of the John Rex Endowment established for this specific project, including:

- A focus on young children ages birth to 8 years.
- Strategies that have the potential to influence vulnerable Wake County children. Vulnerable children, as conceptualized by the John Rex Endowment, are children for whom there are disparities in health and well-being because of race/ethnicity, low-income status, disability, or other factors. For this project particularly, the factors that

THE JOHN REX ENDOWMENT BELIEVES SHAPING CHILDREN’S PLACES AND SPACES, SUCH AS CHILD CARE CENTERS, PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES, AND PRESCHOOLS, IS OUR FOUNDATION’S BEST OPPORTUNITY TO SUPPORT WAKE COUNTY CHILDREN’S POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH.
– JOHN REX ENDOWMENT

influence children's mental health are numerous and complex. Thus relevant factors considered in this project include but are not limited to: immigrant status, poverty, parental low education, racial and ethnic disparities, and experiencing significant early childhood adversity (e.g., trauma, toxic stress).

- An understanding that young children's social emotional development or positive mental health takes place within, and cannot be separated from, the caregiving environment around them including the social and physical environment. Young children's environments are varied and multifaceted, and children spend differing amounts of time in various settings.

For the purposes of this project, the primary settings to be considered are those in which children and their families spend a significant amount of time. Although other settings may affect a large number of children (e.g., doctor's offices, court or office waiting rooms), it is expected that the amount and depth of time spent in a space will influence the impact of the space on development and mental health. Key types of spaces considered include but are not limited to:

- Early childhood education/child care settings (indoor and outdoor)
- Pre-Kindergarten and elementary schools (indoor and outdoor)
- Parks/natural learning environments/playgrounds (outdoor)
- Recreation facilities/museums (indoor)
- Family and community spaces such as community centers and libraries
- Common areas in public housing/neighborhoods
- Emergency housing facilities

Strategies need not be singularly implemented and in fact, should sometimes be undertaken jointly or in sequence. For example, a child care center may decide to participate in professional development while at the same time undertaking an audit for the purposes of enhancing its outdoor space. The Integrated Plan prioritizes leveraging the benefits of current spaces over building new ones.