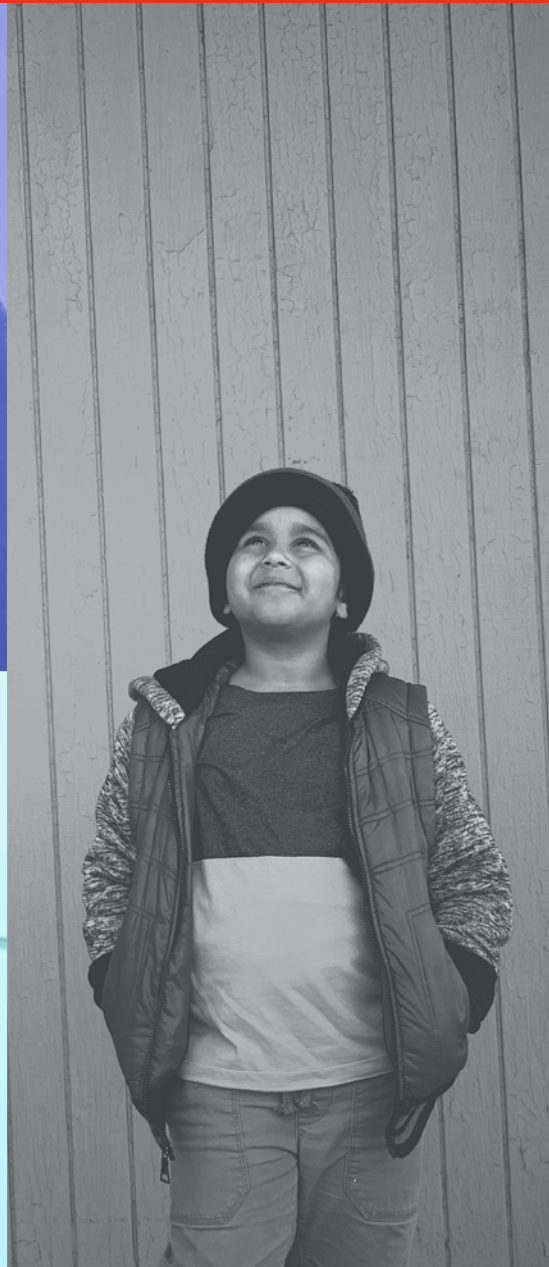


Cradle to Career

MEASURING OUR MOMENTUM



BACKGROUND

How It Began

United Way Centraide Windsor-Essex Chatham-Kent began rethinking its approach to poverty reduction in 2016, when new census data revealed a troubling reality: childhood poverty in our region was higher than the provincial and national averages. The numbers also showed big differences from one neighbourhood to the next. It became clear that not all children were getting the same start in life, and some communities were facing many more obstacles than others. To make real, lasting change, equity had to be at the heart of our work.

Tackling something as complex as generational poverty takes an entire community working together. That's why, in 2018, United Way joined forces with more than 30 local organizations to create ProsperUs, a community-driven effort focused on giving every child and youth a fair chance to succeed from early childhood through to their first job. This *Cradle to Career* approach is built on a shared belief: every young person deserves opportunities to thrive, no matter where they live.

Focusing Support Where It's Needed Most

To honour this commitment to equity, United Way created the Neighbourhood Opportunity Index (NOI), a local data tool that highlights gaps between neighbourhoods and helps guide investments where they are needed most. The NOI ensures that support goes to the communities facing the greatest barriers, rather than being spread evenly across all areas.

When the 2021 Census was released, the numbers showed just how important this approach is. In Windsor-Essex County, 1 in 7 children lived in low-income households. In Downtown and West Windsor, it was 1 in 3 children. In Leamington, it was 1 in 7 children, compared to 1 in 14 in other areas of Essex County. These inequities confirmed that using the NOI to focus on high-need neighbourhoods is not only strategic but essential for creating meaningful and fair change.

Based on this research, the Cradle to Career strategy is being deployed in the priority neighbourhoods of Downtown Windsor, West Windsor, and Leamington.

ProsperUs Powered by United Way

United Way recognizes that education is one of the strongest pathways to future economic opportunity. The *Cradle to Career* approach is a community-led strategy that supports children and youth as they move through key milestones that set them up for long-term success.

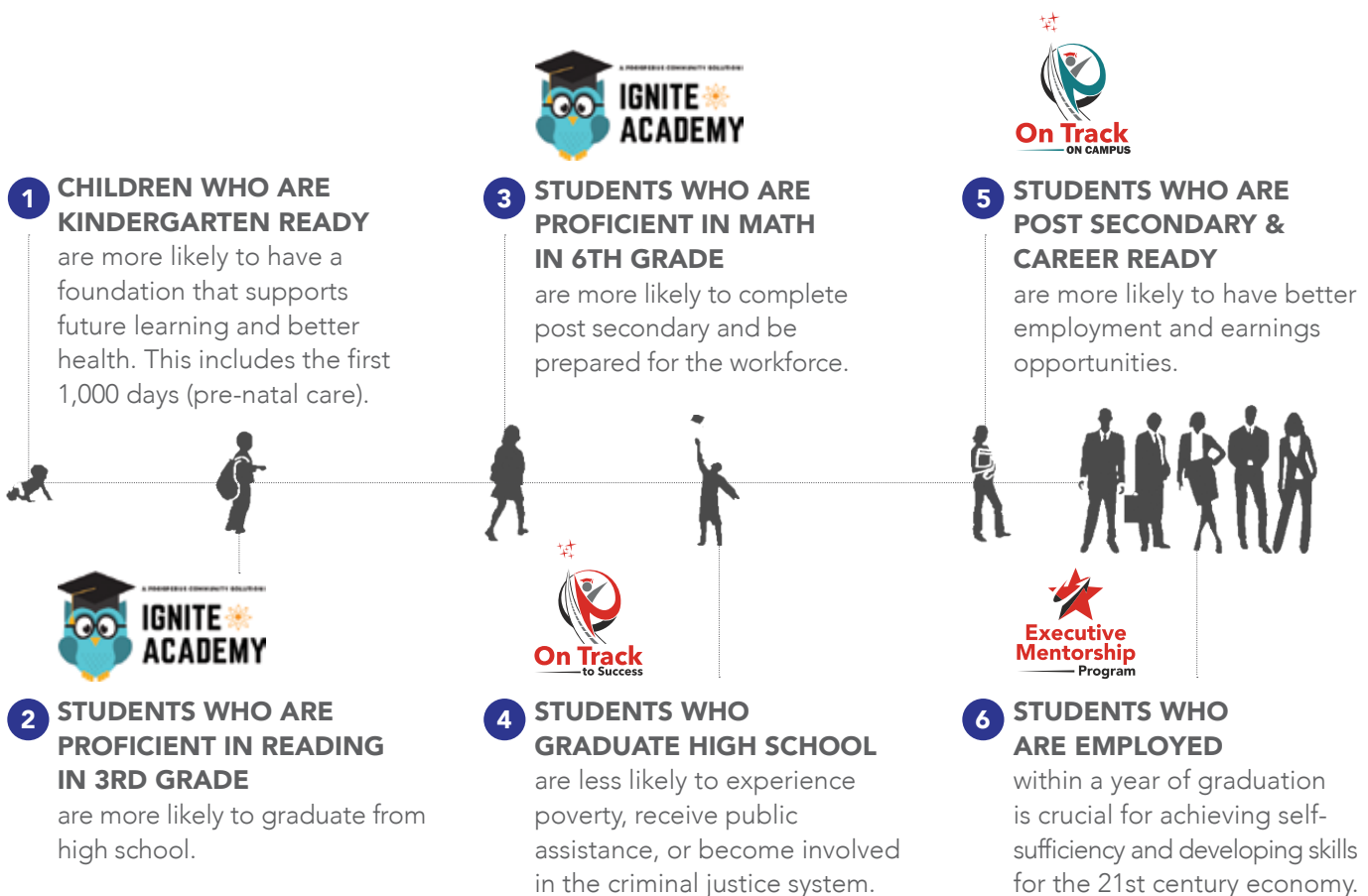
Today, United Way continues to lead and support this work as the backbone of the *Cradle to Career* strategy and the ProsperUs partnership. United Way brings people and organizations together, coordinates efforts, and secures the resources needed to create lasting, meaningful change for local children and families.

Grounded in a commitment to improving outcomes in West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, and Leamington, the *Cradle to Career* approach creates lasting change by

aligning support around what children and families truly need.

Through a collective impact model, United Way and ProsperUs partners stay closely connected, share resources, and use data to guide decisions and ongoing improvement. Together, they strengthen local programs and services while addressing the systemic barriers faced by children and youth living in low-income households.

We do this by supporting strategies that help children and youth at every stage of their journey, ensuring they are ready for kindergarten, meeting reading and math milestones, graduating high school, enrolling in post-secondary education or the trades, and gaining meaningful employment — putting them on a path to long-term success.



Milestones – Key Achievements

Creating long-term solutions meant engaging residents of priority neighbourhoods as experts in the work. In 2019, residents were invited to identify and rank the barriers that children and youth face across the *Cradle to Career* milestones. More than 120 residents joined Community Action Network (CAN) Working Groups in each neighbourhood, collaborating with over 50 service providers to design solutions that could improve local outcomes. They also highlighted key issues that required broader advocacy, beyond what programs and services alone could address.

The feedback from residents and service providers made it clear how to best support children and youth along the *Cradle to Career* journey. It helped identify strategies that give every child the opportunity to reach key milestones, from early learning to entering the workforce. Progress so far is inspiring, and this report showcases the achievements and stories that reflect the real impact of this work in our community.

1 Early Years	2 & 3 Middle Years	4 & 5 High School & Post-Secondary	6 Transition to the Workforce
24 CAN Members 28 Service Providers 10 Comprehensive Solutions	57 CAN Members 46 Service Providers 19 Comprehensive Solutions	24 CAN Members 32 Service Providers 8 Comprehensive Solutions	21 CAN Members 24 Service Providers 6 Comprehensive Solutions
Priority Barriers to Address in Solution Design			
• Childcare • Childhood Development • Literacy	• Mental Health • Out-of-School Academic Support • Food Security	• Navigation • Financial Barriers • Mental Health	• Transportation • Support to Connect to Gainful Employment • Physical and Mental Wellness

1 Kindergarten Readiness

In 2022, United Way partnered with St. Clair College, Windsor Public Library, and Essex County Library to address early literacy gaps and strengthen kindergarten readiness in the priority neighbourhoods. Together, we piloted the **1,000 Books Before Kindergarten** program, engaging more than 170 children under five and their caregivers across library branches in West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, and Leamington. The program encouraged families to read 1,000 books

before kindergarten, promoting early literacy, language development, and a love of reading.

Participants received incentives as they reached reading milestones, and Windsor Public Library offered additional support through reading sessions and literacy workshops. Families collectively read over 20,000 books, and 84% of post-project survey respondents reported that visiting the library has become a higher priority for their family.

2 & 3 Proficiency in Math & Literacy in Grade School

Ignite Academy, the first community-designed *Cradle to Career* pilot program, launched in Fall 2022. The program is run in collaboration with the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County, South Essex Community Council, the Greater Essex County District School Board, and the Windsor Essex Catholic District School Board. This free program strengthens literacy and math skills, provides caregivers with system navigation support, offers nutritious meals, and delivers a range of recreational and cultural activities. Ignite Academy operates four days a week and serves students in Grades 2 to 7 across six schools: General Brock, Begley, Immaculate Conception, St. James, St. Louis, and Queen Elizabeth.

Over the past three years, Ignite Academy has kept steady enrollment, with about 210 students participating each year.

Fewer students are leaving the program, attendance has remained strong, and the range of activities and supports has expanded. Students are now taking part in more recreation, arts and cultural activities, mentoring, and academic supports than in earlier years.

At the same time, staff are connecting with caregivers and school teams more frequently. These interactions include check-ins, referrals, discussions about student needs, and help finding services. Families are being linked to supports such as mental health services, behaviour support, and assistance in navigating school processes.



2 & 3 Academic Support

In the first year, academic support was mostly group-based. When early results showed that this approach was not enough, United Way tested a five-week literacy pilot in two schools. One school continued with group work only, while the other added one-to-one support. The difference was significant. The group-based school showed very little growth, while the school that received one-to-one support made strong reading gains in only 19 days. This confirmed that students benefit most from personalized help.

Following the pilot, Ignite expanded literacy and math interventions, increased the number of academic days, and added more staff to provide individualized support. These changes led to rapid growth in academic programming. From Year 2 to Year 3, total academic sessions increased by 65%, literacy sessions increased by 54%, and math sessions increased by 34%.

“

I appreciate the improvement on academics.

CAREGIVER, IGNITE ACADEMY

It's an amazing program and we are so lucky to have it. The staff are absolutely phenomenal.

CAREGIVER, IGNITE ACADEMY

We feel our life changed for the better.

CAREGIVER, IGNITE ACADEMY

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By the end of Year 3 (the 2024-2025 school year), the program demonstrated strong results. Among students who required intensive support at the start of the year, 70% improved their reading skills. Across all participating students, oral reading fluency increased by an average of 17.5%. Math outcomes were also positive: 93% of students improved their skills between the beginning and end of the school year. At program entry, students were missing an average of 68% of Number Sense skills; by year's end, this gap had narrowed to 22%, reflecting substantial growth.



As the program continues to evolve, Ignite Academy will introduce STEM programming in Year 4. This will provide students with hands-on learning experiences that build curiosity, confidence, and problem-solving skills while expanding the program beyond literacy and math.



87%

of kids feel proud of themselves for learning from Ignite Academy



100%

of caregivers reported their child benefits from Ignite Academy



93%

of kids showed improvement in math by the end of the year

Neveen's Story

When Neveen and her family arrived in Windsor, everything felt uncertain — a new country, a new language, and no place to call home. With help from **Ignite Academy**, a United Way-supported program that helps children and families build strong foundations for success, they began to find stability. Through practical supports like grocery gift cards as well as focused academic help and mentorship for her son, the family gained confidence and hope for the future. Today, they're thriving — and their story is a powerful reminder of how your support helps local families build brighter futures.

Munir's Story

For Munir, adjusting to life in Canada wasn't easy. After arriving in Windsor with his family, he faced language barriers, financial struggles, and the uncertainty of starting fresh. But through United Way's **Ignite Academy**, Munir found encouragement, friendship, and the support he needed to succeed. With tutoring, mentorship, and caring guidance, he gained confidence and began to dream about his future. Munir's story is a reminder that when children have the right support, anything is possible.

4 & 5 High School & Post-Secondary Readiness

The **On Track to Success (OTTS)** program supports students living in the priority neighbourhoods in graduating high school and preparing for post-secondary education, including college, university, and the skilled trades. By addressing systemic and individual barriers through tutoring, mentoring, financial assistance, and socio-emotional resources, OTTS ensures students are equipped with the relationships, readiness, and resilience to take their next steps with confidence. Since the program began in 2015, 317 OTTS students have graduated from high school.

In 2021, the **Ujima Initiative** launched to provide an additional layer of support for African, Caribbean, and Black youth in West Windsor and Downtown Windsor. This program stream offers



Daniella's Story

A recent high school graduate with big dreams of becoming a surgeon and making healthcare more equitable. But her path wasn't easy. Support from OTTS and Ujima helped her overcome financial challenges, build confidence, and head to university with purpose.

“

I believe in the power of giving back and being a role model for others. Everything I've experienced so far has helped shape the kind of leader I want to be.

DANIELLA, OTTS GRADUATE

Without United Way, I wouldn't have had the resources to graduate high school, let alone be on the verge of graduating post-secondary. Their support has touched nearly every part of my life in the most personal and practical ways.

ASHLEY, OTTS GRADUATE

culturally relevant programming and resources that complement the core OTTS supports, ensuring students can thrive in environments that reflect and honour their identities and experiences. The initiative has continued to grow and now supports 35 students this school year.

In the 2024-2025 academic year, 98% of OTTS students graduated from high school. This achievement exceeds the provincial 5-year graduation rates of 89.5%. This success underscores the program's effectiveness in guiding students to reach this critical milestone.



Alex's Story

Sometimes, the biggest difference in a child's life comes from knowing someone believes in them. As a United Way Success Coach, Alex is there when students need someone in their corner most — helping them overcome barriers, set goals, and believe in themselves. It is a powerful reminder of what happens when community support wraps around students and their families.

This program has really help[ed] and give[n] my family HOPE. I am forever grateful for everything over this year.

CAREGIVER, OTTS STUDENT



98%
of students in
the program
graduated high
school
on time



92%
of students
started and
stayed in the
program



90%
of students felt
OTTS prepared
them for post-
secondary
education

5 & 6 Transition into the Workforce

The **On Track on Campus** (OTOC) program supports recent graduates of the On Track to Success initiative as they transition into post-secondary education, helping them stay enrolled in their programs or re-engage with their studies after a break. Students meet weekly with a Success Coach for individualized guidance, with support tailored to their level of need.



During the 2024-2025 academic year, OTOC conducted 480 formal check-ins and 169 casual check-ins, helping students build confidence, navigate challenges, and stay on track academically. These consistent touchpoints are part of our strategy to strengthen student retention by identifying challenges early and providing timely support to keep students on track. As of November 2025, 134 students are enrolled in post-secondary education, and 50 alumni have graduated through post-secondary education.

The **Executive Mentorship Program** (EMP) supports OTOC students after their first year of post-secondary education in obtaining a meaningful mentorship opportunity during the summer. Since launching in 2022, 26 students have participated in EMP.



Participants completed 30 hours of paid pre-mentorship training, which covered topics such as assimilating into a new workplace, resume and cover letter development, networking skills, personal branding, professional conduct, verbal and non-verbal communication, and strategies for responding to constructive feedback. Following training, each participant was matched with a part-time paid summer internship aligned with their educational background and future career goals.

This hands-on experience strengthened students' job readiness and confidence, built relevant work experience, and expanded their professional networks. Mentors provided ongoing guidance, shared career-specific knowledge, and conducted two performance evaluations to support skill development and professional growth.

“

I was very uncertain about my next steps after school and the career path I wanted to follow. Getting this position, along with having a mentor who was truly invested in helping me, made a huge difference... Because of this experience, I now feel more confident, clearer about my options, and closer to making decisions and planning my long-term goals.

OTOC STUDENT

Something that will definitely stay with me is the insight I gained from having a mentor who shares similar goals and life experiences. I could genuinely feel that all of her advice and feedback came from a place of care and encouragement.

OTOC STUDENT

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Cross-Milestone Solutions

United Way recognizes that social determinants of health, such as social inclusion, access to nutritious food, healthcare, affordable housing, and financial security, are essential for children and youth to succeed at each milestone. That is why we invest in programs designed to tackle the key challenges faced by residents in priority neighbourhoods, helping to create a stronger foundation for lifelong success.

Summer Eats for Kids

Summer should be a carefree time for kids to play and have fun — but for many families in our community, it's also a season of food insecurity. When school food programs pause over the summer, many families struggle to put healthy food on the table.

Every year, **Summer Eats for Kids** operates twice a week over seven weeks in July and August, serving six school sites located in the priority neighbourhoods. Thanks to the generosity of our amazing donors, United Way's Summer Programs not only provided healthy and nutritious food but

also supported learning over the summer by distributing free books, backpacks and school supplies – something many families see as a luxury they can't afford.

For many families, the program played a vital role in meeting their food needs. In 2025, 26.5% of participants relied on Summer Eats as their main food source, a 6.5% increase from 2024, while 64% used it as a secondary source alongside other food banks or grocery shopping. 66% of those households were returning participants, showing that most families come back multiple times.

In 2025:

4,094

food bags were distributed

6,100

free books were given to children

1,312

unique households were served

1,900

backpacks were distributed

“

It's a significant help for me and my family. They provide numerous necessities including vegetables, books, snacks and so on which are beyond my purchase abilities. So, I really appreciate the approach of bestowing free fundamental things to the poor families including me to alleviate our suffering from poverty.

CAREGIVER

The volunteers were extremely nice and the set up was very organized. We appreciate your kindness. Was our 1st visit and my little one loved his book!

SUMMER EATS PARTICIPANT

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West Windsor School Lunch Pilots

In 2024, United Way received funding from the Gordie Howe International Bridge Community Benefits Plan to launch the **West Windsor School Lunch Pilot**. The pilot aims to enhance student well-being, attendance, and sense of connection to the community; reduce stress for families by easing the weekly cost and time spent preparing school lunches; and create meaningful opportunities for engagement among parents, students, youth, and neighbourhood stakeholders. Additionally, the pilot has allowed United Way to explore social enterprise opportunities related to growing, preparing, and cooking food for school programs to further strengthen the social and economic impact in the priority neighbourhoods.

During the 2024-2025 school year, the school lunch pilot launched in two elementary schools. In September 2025, the pilot expanded to include two secondary schools. The program now delivers 1,200 nutritious hot lunches each week to every student across all four pilot sites, with more than 45,000 meals served to date.



In 2025:

1,200

nutritious hot lunches
delivered weekly

45,000

meals served to date

Ashley's Story

When Ashley first joined United Way's **On Track to Success** youth program in Grade 9, she had no idea it would shape nearly every step of her future. Today, she's a soon-to-be college graduate building her career through the **Executive Mentorship Program**, supported by a workplace team and a success coach who champion her growth and a community that's been with her since the start.





Community Action Network Working Groups

Since 2019, residents have continued to guide the work through the Community Action Network (CAN). Starting in March 2022, the CAN shifted its focus to addressing systemic issues that impact the quality of life and long-term prosperity for residents and the region. The work began with a review of advocacy priorities identified in Milestones 1 to 6 of the Solution Design process.

In Windsor, residents in West Windsor and Downtown Windsor focused on increasing access to primary care, working with local stakeholders to advocate for additional resources for expanding Primary Care-Based Teams. In Leamington, the focus was on affordable housing and increasing transitional shelter space across the county.

Both groups have also joined forces to support a national school food program, taking part in the Coalition for Healthy School Food's Great Big Crunch campaign to raise awareness and build momentum

for strong, universal, and sustainable school food programs. They have also been involved in 'Get Out the Vote' campaigns during municipal elections to boost voter turnout and encourage civic engagement in the priority neighbourhoods.

Additionally, they organize annual Back-to-School Celebrations in the priority neighbourhoods, providing a range of free services and activities for children and caregivers. These events include haircuts, games and art activities, information booths from community organizations, health assessments and immunization updates from the Windsor Essex Ontario Health Team's Mobile Health Clinic, oral health checks and kits from the Smile Wagon Mobile Dental Hygiene Clinic, and bike safety demonstrations from Windsor Police Services. In 2025, an estimated 4,000 participants attended events in West and Downtown Windsor, with another 500 in Leamington.

Pathway to Potential Neighbourhood Programs

Across all Cradle to Career solution design consultations, **Community Connectors** emerged as a key solution to improving access to and awareness of local programs and services that meet the unique needs of children and their families. In 2025, United Way received funding from the City of Windsor and County of Essex to launch Pathway to Potential's Neighbourhood Programs in West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, and Leamington. This poverty reduction strategy aims to enhance residents' quality of life by:

- Activating resources – increasing awareness of local programs, services, and businesses.
- Empowering residents – convening neighbourhood advisory committees to guide our efforts and facilitating workshops that support residents' well-being.
- Building social capital – fostering trust, relationships, and a sense of belonging within the community.

To support this work, the Neighbourhood Program teams include Community Connectors who build trust with residents, help them navigate systems, and provide warm referrals to connect them with programs and resources.



Looking Ahead

Mutually Reinforcing Activities are coordinated actions and strategies carried out by different organizations and stakeholders working together toward a shared goal that advances *Cradle to Career* milestones. As a key part of collective impact, these activities ensure that organizations complement each other and generate a greater combined effect. They rely on coordination and communication, sharing resources or data, and leveraging each partner's strengths to achieve stronger outcomes.

Looking ahead, mutually reinforcing activities will be established with organizations offering programs and services aligned with Milestone 1. By collaborating with community partners who have expertise in childhood development and early literacy, access to programs and services will be increased and their impact maximized for children aged 0 to 6 and their caregivers in West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, and Leamington.

Long-Term Goals

In the longer term, United Way and ProsperUs partners aim to create seamless support for children, youth, and families across all *Cradle to Career* milestones. This includes implementing mutually reinforcing activities for Milestone 1, expanding Ignite Academy to serve Grade 8 students as they transition into high school, and scaling Ignite to all elementary schools in priority neighbourhoods. It also involves extending On Track to Success to reach more youth living in those neighbourhoods. With the success of the school lunch pilot in West Windsor and the recent funding commitment from the Federal government, work is also underway to stabilize the pilot and expand school lunch to other schools in the Windsor-Essex area where the need is greatest.

The *Cradle to Career* approach demonstrates that helping children thrive is not about a single program or moment. It requires a

coordinated network of supports working together over time. When we begin early, even in infancy, and ensure children and families have access to essentials such as nutritious food, stable housing, quality healthcare, and strong educational opportunities, we provide them with a genuine chance to succeed. When these supports are layered and sustained, they can transform a child's trajectory and help break the cycle of poverty for future generations.

This work is made possible by the commitment of community partners, the generosity of donors, the dedication of local residents and volunteers, and the resilience and determination of children and youth themselves. By coming together in this way, we can create a future where a child's opportunities are determined not by circumstance but by their potential.



POWERED
BY



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