

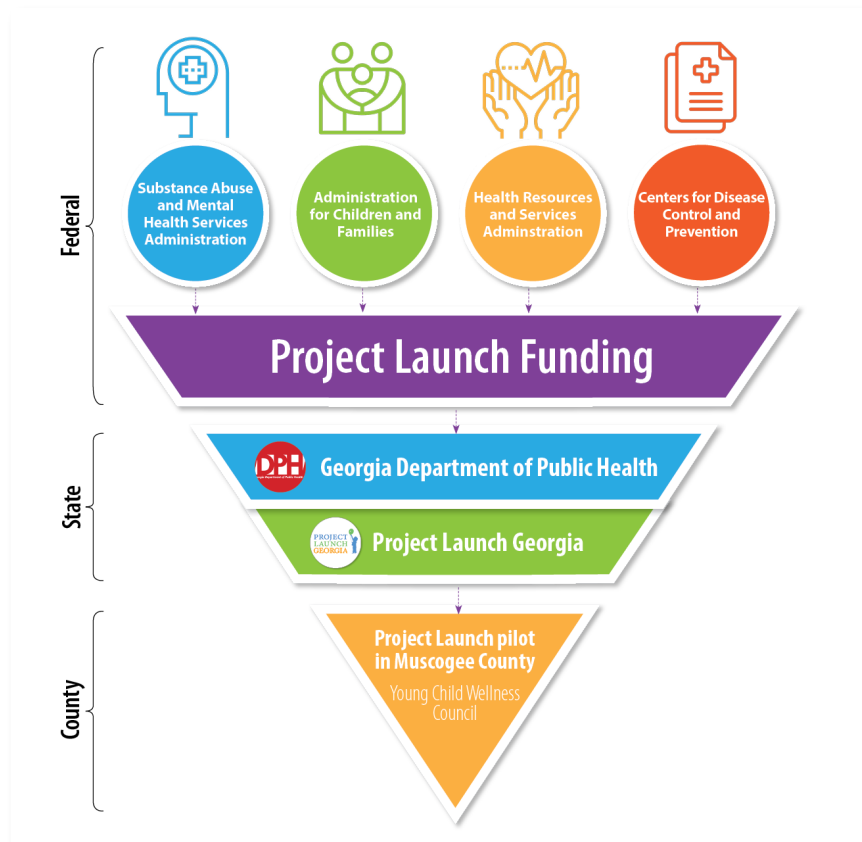


## Georgia Department of Public Health uses community partnerships and Project LAUNCH funding to scale parent programming county-wide

When the Georgia Department of Public Health (Georgia DPH) received a five-year federal grant from Project LAUNCH to support healthy development of children ages 0-8, they knew just where to spend it.

A 2010 survey of the state had identified the top 25 counties in need of better support for child and maternal health. Muscogee County, which sits on the western edge of the state and is home to Columbus, the third-largest city in Georgia, made it onto the list. About 250,000 people live in the county, and about a quarter live in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Sixty percent of children in elementary school in the county qualify for free or reduced lunch, the school district reports.

Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children’s Health) is a unique funding program designed to ensure children across the country enter school ready to succeed. The project is a partnership between the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Administration for Children and Families, the Health Resources and Services Administration, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and is designed to coordinate and meet the goals of each division.



“Project LAUNCH seeks to improve outcomes at the individual, family, and community levels by addressing risk factors that can lead to negative outcomes. Project LAUNCH promotes protective factors that support resilience and healthy development, which can protect individuals from later problems,” the website explains.

When a local site receives funding from Project LAUNCH, they evaluate and implement solutions to support the project’s five core strategies:

1. Screening and assessment
2. Enhanced home visiting that focuses on social and emotional well-being
3. Mental health consultation in early care and education programs
4. Integration of behavioral health into primary care settings
5. Family strengthening and parent skills training

To support the last strategy — strengthening families and providing parent skills training — the West Central Health District (WCHD) of Georgia DPH, which oversees the Project LAUNCH implementation in Muscogee County, decided to use a portion of the funding to implement LENA Start.

## How LENA Start supports school readiness

LENA Start is a program for parents that uses regular feedback from LENA technology to help increase interactive talk in order to support kindergarten readiness and build stronger families.

“We want to see parents empowered and provide them with the information they need to advocate for their children and support their children throughout the early years,” former Project LAUNCH coordinator Semilla Neal said.

LENA Start focuses on increasing interactive talk because it has been proven to be a key factor in early brain development. Research shows that the amount of conversation children experience is related to their brain structure and function and is linked to their IQ and language abilities in adolescence.

“Unfortunately, we still have a lot of work to do as a state when it comes to school readiness. We’ve identified that it all starts with early brain development, so if we’re able to close the word gap we can provide a successful foundation for children entering school,” Neal said.



## Building a county-wide program

When LENA Start began in Muscogee County in early 2019, Neal and her team at the West Central Health District drew on a wide range of existing community partners to find space to run classes and recruit parents.

Every month, they host a Young Child Wellness Council, which brings together 75 community organizations to strategize on supporting child health locally.

“We know that it’s necessary to have partners to have a successful program,” Neal said. “We invited all our partners to the initial LENA Start Coordinator Training to provide them with a very hands-on introduction to what we’re doing and to get buy in.”

Their partners offered space for classes — with spring and summer classes taking place at the local library and fall classes taking place at the University of Georgia Extension Office — and supported participant recruitment.

For example, at the beginning of the year WCHD offered a community baby shower for new and expectant parents in partnership with the local WIC office. More than 15 parents signed up to attend LENA Start classes at the event.

WCHD also reached out directly via email to every parent they’d served in the year prior to launching LENA Start, inviting families to join the class or refer a friend. By keeping enrollment permanently open, the team is able to capture the contact information of interested parents, even if the next class doesn’t begin for several weeks.

Through a partnership with Reach Out and Read Georgia, WCHD has been able to reach out to families living at the local army base, Fort Benning. Reach Out and Read operates a chapter at the hospital on the base, where two parents recently presented about how they’ve seen LENA Start benefit their children.

“We’re finding that the partnership with the military is a great opportunity for those families to get involved as well,” Neal said.

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## Closing the early talk gap in the county and the state

Another key partner is Talk With Me Baby, a statewide program developed by Georgia's Department of Public Health and seven other community partners to encourage parents to talk, read, and sing with their infants and toddlers.

"We are thrilled with the success of LENA Start in Muscogee county. The community has embraced the initiative as a means to reduce the word gap and set children on a path to reading proficiency by the end of third grade. We hope to identify funding to support the expansion of LENA Start to additional communities across the state that would also benefit from this program," Kimberly Stringer Ross, Senior Manager of Early Brain Development and Language Acquisition at Georgia DPH said.

LENA Start provides objective data feedback and coaching on interactive talk that allows parents to establish new conversational habits. As the first group of Muscogee County parents move through classes this year, the results are already crystallizing, Neal said.

"We just had session seven, which is a mid-point reflection and sharing time, so we heard from parents. One said the program has been an eye opener, and another mentioned she thought she was speaking with her child, but had realized she wasn't allowing him time to respond," Neal said. "Parents say they enjoy seeing their progress, and they're really enjoying the reports and seeing those outcomes."



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### Learn more about LENA Start!

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LENA Start is a program for parents that uses regular feedback from LENA technology to help increase interactive talk in order to close the early-talk gap, support kindergarten readiness, and build stronger families.

Visit [www.LENA.org/LENA-Start](http://www.LENA.org/LENA-Start) for more information.