



# BEST BEGINNINGS

Alaska's Early Childhood Investment

>>>>REPORT TO ALASKA 2008 >>>>



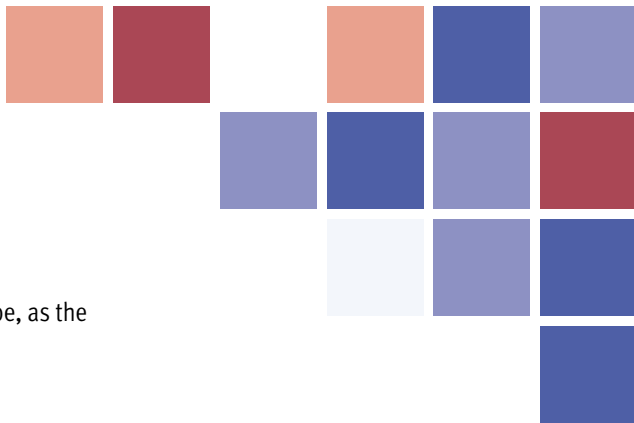
## »» Best Beginnings Vision

All Alaska children begin school ready to succeed.

## »» Key Objectives

### **Best Beginnings will have succeeded when:**

- » Parents and extended family are engaged in their children's learning from birth on.
- » Most Alaskans know that early learning and literacy are important to society.
- » Most Alaskans understand that investments in early learning pay big dividends to the state as a whole.
- » Sufficient funds are committed – from public and private sources – to ensure that every Alaska child has the opportunity to begin school ready to succeed.



## >>> From the executive director

A movement is underway. While many Alaskans are not yet aware of it, they soon will be, as the movement bubbles to the surface in communities across the state.

Books for babies? You bet.

Businesses care whether children start school prepared to succeed? Some do and more are joining their ranks.

Right from birth, babies and young children are primed to learn. When a baby's brain is nurtured by the adults in her world through reading, play, singing, and other forms of interaction, her brain develops in amazing ways at phenomenal speed.

Children aren't blank slates when they start school. There's a multitude of skills and knowledge they need if they're to succeed. To borrow from a speech by Bill Gates, Sr., we're not talking about 5-year-olds who can analyze the use of metaphor in Mark Twain's lesser works. We're talking about the basic building blocks of making sure a child is ready to learn in a school setting. Can she cooperate with other children? Can he recognize colors? Can she follow simple rules and instructions? Is he curious and eager to learn?

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... Alaska is on its way to becoming a place where all children have the opportunity to succeed in life and, in the process, build a healthy and thriving state.  
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Preparing children for school is far more than just a family matter. Numerous studies have demonstrated an incontrovertible truth: early learning and literacy is a powerful determinant of success in school and success in life. Children who start school with a solid foundation of early learning contribute more to society. They go farther in school, they get better jobs, are far less likely to go on welfare, or go to jail. Early learning and literacy is everybody's business.

Alaskans are getting engaged in this critically important issue. Best Beginnings is both a reflection of that engagement and an accelerator of it. Thanks to the vision of Best Beginnings' founders and supporters, Alaska is on its way to becoming a place where all children have the opportunity to succeed in life and, in the process, build a healthy and thriving state.

Alaska will have what it needs to make sure all children are prepared for school when Alaskans expect and insist that our public and private institutions support whatever investments are needed to finance and sustain early learning and literacy.

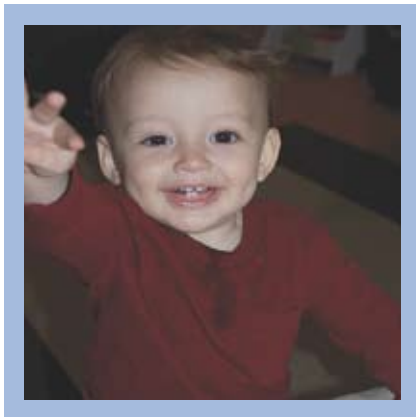
That's called a cultural shift. It won't come easily and it won't come quickly – all the more reason to stoke it through advocacy, collaboration, and plenty of drum-beating.

That is precisely the charge of Best Beginnings.

Within that context, I am pleased to present the first comprehensive report of Best Beginnings. As you will see in the pages that follow, Best Beginnings has taken on an imposing amount of work since this public-private partnership got underway in late 2006. We are fully engaged and hope you'll join with us in this critical but formidable challenge – there's a role for every Alaskan to play.

Abbe Hensley  
June 2008

“ Children who have access to quality learning opportunities, at home or in away-from-home programs, are more likely to graduate from high school, get better paying jobs, avoid spending time in jail, and lead more productive lives. ”



## »» Why early learning matters

A large and growing body of research provides persuasive evidence of four related tenets. From birth to age 6, brain development occurs at an astonishing pace. Nurturing and brain stimulation during those years has a profound impact on how children fare in school. A child's readiness for school is a powerful determinant of how he or she will fare in life. And investments in early childhood development yield extraordinary returns to the workforce and the economy.

Economists say there is a profound link between a child's early exposure to learning and literacy and his or her success in later life as a contributing member of society.

Children who have access to quality learning opportunities, at home or in away-from-home programs, are more likely to graduate from high school, get better paying jobs, avoid spending time in jail, and lead more productive lives. They are more likely to develop critical thinking skills, pay higher taxes, and raise healthy families. They are less likely to go on welfare or be incarcerated.

Yet now nearly half of Alaska children enter school unprepared to become successful readers or learners. Alaska's children lag behind their peers nationally in reading and math skills. And declining pre-kindergarten trends contribute to Alaska's low scores on standardized third-grade tests, poor performance on the High School Graduation Qualification Exams, and high school drop-out rates.

The situation has serious implications for children's own prospects and for Alaska's. When children are not prepared for school, they rarely really catch up. They are far less likely to have the skills employers need, to contribute to a thriving economy, and to provide the highly trained workforce essential to compete in the global economy.

Economists and national business leaders agree that the most important step a state can make to strengthen its economy is to invest in early childhood education. That's why it matters.



## >>> Origin of Best Beginnings

The seeds for Best Beginnings were planted in 2003, when the Alaska Humanities Council, United Way of Anchorage, the Rasmuson Foundation, The CIRI Foundation, and the Alaska State Library began to focus attention on the need for coordinated efforts in early childhood literacy in Alaska.

A nationwide movement on early education and literacy was triggered in large part by the publication in 2000 of “Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development.” This report cast a spotlight on the gap between scientific knowledge about early childhood and actual practices in society.

The study put the nation on alert about the need to address early learning and literacy as a social and economic imperative with far-reaching implications. Initiatives began popping up across the nation, but in Alaska the efforts were isolated and uncoordinated.

In 2004, the Alaska Humanities Forum, with encouragement and funding from the Rasmuson Foundation and The CIRI Foundation, convened a gathering of professionals from myriad entities engaged in early childhood literacy. This first conference led to several more gatherings and conferences where the importance of early learning was seen in tandem with early literacy. A steering committee composed of entities concerned about these issues created the Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Task Force.

The 27 members of Alaska’s Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Task Force included leaders in business, civic organizations, philanthropy, nonprofits, education, and government. Over the course of 10 months, the group gathered input from Alaskans and national experts.

The Task Force released its report and recommendations in September 2006. Best Beginnings emerged from the Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Task Force as a public-private partnership charged with pursuing the task force recommendations.



## »» Activities and Accomplishments

The work of Best Beginnings falls generally into three areas.

Because parents are their child's first and most important teachers, Best Beginnings promotes early learning and literacy, family literacy, and education.

Because so many young children spend time in care away from home, Best Beginnings is a catalyst for high quality, affordable, accessible, child care and early learning programs for all families who want them.

Because preparing all children for success in school has such profound implications for the state as a whole, Best Beginnings is accelerating a cultural shift of Alaskans' expectations and priorities. We will know this cultural shift has taken root when Alaskans expect and insist on the investments required to finance and sustain early learning and literacy.

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The Inupiat of the Northwest Arctic have always known that singing and purposeful baby talk – called *nuniatq* – are good for a baby’s brain.

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## **>>>Supporting parents as a child’s first and most important teachers**

### **Supporting local initiatives**

As more and more people engage in the drive for early learning and literacy, exciting initiatives are cropping up in communities all over Alaska. Best Beginnings is supporting them.

Best Beginnings provides ongoing assistance to the Anchorage-based early literacy project “ABC Read and Talk With Me.”

Best Beginnings is helping the Fairbanks Early Childhood Development Commission build a Web site with information for parents and others who care for young children.

The Inupiat of the Northwest Arctic have always known that singing and purposeful baby talk – called *nuniatq* – are good for a baby’s brain. Best Beginnings partnered with local groups in Kotzebue and funded a public awareness campaign to reinforce *nuniatq* through posters, bookmarks, and radio public service announcements.

In April 2008, Best Beginnings committed to help local Alaska communities that are launching Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, a national program that provides a free book every month to young children in subscribing communities.



“ Being prepared for school requires certain knowledge and skills acquired in the first five or six years of life.

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### **Family-Friendly Activity Booklets**

Parents want to teach their children early and well, but they don't always know which activities best prepare their young children for school. And for those families whose home language is not English, it is difficult to find materials that can help.

Best Beginnings is creating family-friendly activity booklets, based on the state's Early Learning Guidelines, in languages other than English. The first two are in Spanish and Yup'ik. Advisory groups are organized for each language community to ensure the activities are culturally relevant and appropriate. This project is supported by a multi-year grant from the Alaska Children's Trust.

### **Books for young Alaskans**

Children need to see themselves in books. Too often, the books available to children in our state are neither geographically nor culturally consistent with the lives of young Alaskans. Best Beginnings developed an annotated bibliography of books for young children that reflect Alaska people and their communities.

### **Spreading the word**

To help spread the word among parents about the importance of early learning and literacy and to highlight the best practices for parents and extended family, Best Beginnings produces and distributes public service announcements for television and radio. These spots are broadcast in communities all over the state.

In addition, Best Beginnings partnered with KTUU Channel 2, seen in most of the state, in a six-week campaign promoting early learning and literacy. The campaign included two TV spots about easy, fun interactions between a parent and child, and taped segments of news personalities reading selected children's books. The segments were posted on the Channel 2 and Best Beginnings Web sites. The campaign ran in late 2007 and may be repeated in 2008.





### ***>>> Advocating for high quality, affordable, accessible child care***

#### **Ratings and standards for child care**

How do parents compare and evaluate early learning programs and child care facilities? What criteria do they use to determine which program is best for their child? For that matter, how do child care and early learning professionals know how they stand up against their colleagues and competition? Most child care and early learning professionals know what it takes to improve the quality of their programs but lack the resources to pay for them.

To help meet those needs the state contracted with Best Beginnings to develop the plan for a standards-based “Quality Rating and Improvement System.” The system will be voluntary in that participation by child care and early learning programs won’t be required, but there will be financial incentives to do so. The system will also offer financial incentives for quality improvements. Programs that earn high ratings would be strong candidates for any state-supported pre-kindergarten effort.

Such rating and improvement systems are used in 16 other states and are designed to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality of early care and early learning programs outside the home.

The plan produced by Best Beginnings includes a budget for field-testing and phased-in implementation. The project was funded by a grant from the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. The next step is to obtain funding in the FY 2010 state budget for field-testing. Field-testing will take about two years.

#### **Early Learning Guidelines**

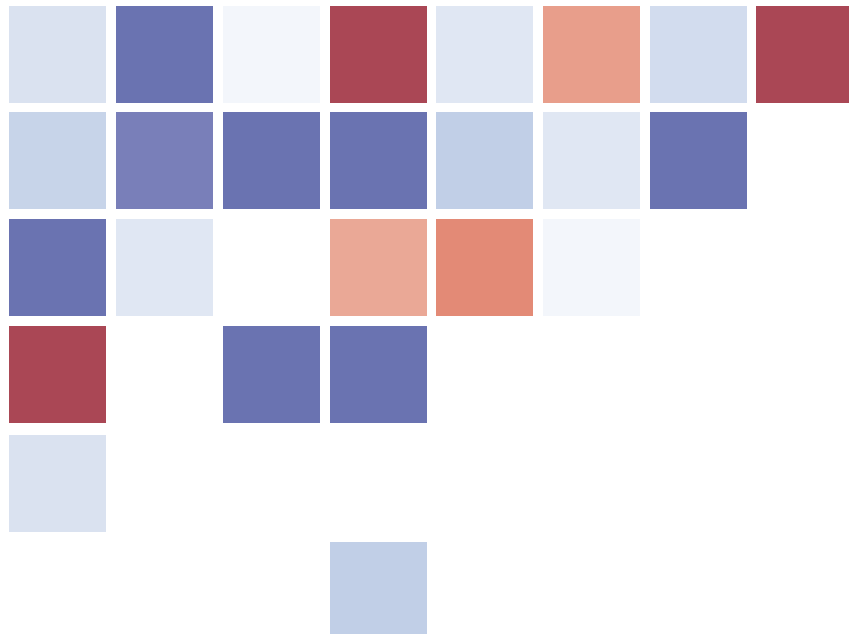
Being prepared for school requires certain knowledge and skills acquired in the first five or six years of life. What should babies and young children know and be able to do – and when?

In 2007, the State of Alaska published Alaska’s Early Learning Guidelines, a resource document describing what young children from birth to age 5 should know, understand, and be able to do at different stages.

The guidelines help parents and other adults who work with young children understand both child development and their own roles in providing appropriate learning opportunities for children.

Best Beginnings is involved with the Early Learning Guidelines in three ways. To make the guidelines easier to use and more accessible, Best Beginnings is creating family-focused activity books based on the guidelines, in languages other than English. This project is supported by a grant from the Alaska Children’s Trust.

Because the guidelines aren’t much good sitting on a shelf, Best Beginnings is helping to publicize and distribute the guidelines by making them available on its Web site and talking about them at every opportunity. Best Beginnings is also working with other agencies and organizations to develop and coordinate training of parents and early childhood educators in how to use the guidelines.



### **Adapting programs that work in other states**

Best Beginnings is coordinating plans for a multi-year Alaska Native Head Start Literacy Project using the successful PBS program “Between the Lions” and locally adapted curriculum. As of May 2008, funds were being sought to support programs at selected Head Start sites. Once funding is secured, it will take about two years to implement and evaluate those first programs. After the evaluation, the curriculum and related materials will become available throughout Alaska.

The project has been very successful at 11 tribal Head Start programs in New Mexico and similar outcomes are expected for Alaska. In the New Mexico programs, children at risk for reading failure dropped from 39% to 12% and children scoring above average increased from 23% to 64%.

Best Beginnings’ partners in this effort include WGBH Boston, The CIRI Foundation, BP, RurAL CAP, Southcentral Foundation Head Start, Bristol Bay Native Association Head Start, the Alaska Head Start Collaboration Office, the Alaska State Library, Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, and the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER).

### **>>> Accelerating the cultural shift**

Alaska will have what it needs to make sure all children are prepared for school – paving the way for a vibrant workforce and thriving economy – when most Alaskans expect and insist on the investments required to finance and sustain early learning and literacy.

### **Communications**

Accelerating a cultural shift includes, among many other elements, finding ways to enter the public consciousness. All of Best Beginnings’ work contributes to that end, but Best Beginnings is also disseminating information through electronic media, with a Web site and electronic newsletter, as well as press releases when appropriate.

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Best Beginnings views bringing people together as one of its most important functions.

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### **Engage, convene, mobilize**

Many agencies and groups in Alaska are actively pursuing early learning and literacy in myriad ways, but there has been little coordination and communication. To help make the most of the various efforts, Best Beginnings organizes formal conferences, such as the Governor’s Summit on Early Learning, as well as impromptu, informal meetings of groups with related interests.

Best Beginnings views this role of bringing people, groups, and organizations together as one of its most important functions. Government, private, and nonprofit sectors must be partners in the drive for early learning and literacy. To increase awareness among leaders in these sectors, Best Beginnings collaborated with the Governor’s Office and others to coordinate a two-day conference in December 2007. The summit was funded by the National Governors Association and Alaska partners.

The conference brought together more than 150 Alaskans – including elected officials, business and nonprofit leaders, child care professionals, and education leaders – to address three goals: improve access to early literacy and learning opportunities for

children most in need of such services at home and away from home; improve coordination of these services; and increase the engagement of parents and extended family in young children’s learning by providing support, resources, and incentives.

Work is underway on four of the five highest priority recommendations. All the recommendations have been presented to Governor Palin.

### **Learning from the best**

Several other states are further along than Alaska in their early learning initiatives and Best Beginnings is taking advantage of what others have learned. Best Beginnings was one of two initiatives in the country to receive a two-year technical assistance grant in 2008 to learn from North Carolina’s Smart Start initiative, one of the nation’s leading programs. Best Beginnings is the 12th initiative nationwide to tap the experience of Smart Start.

The technical assistance grant gives Best Beginnings access to resources, meetings, conferences, and expertise.

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All Alaskans have a stake in building a statewide system that provides and supports quality early learning at home and in away-from-home programs.

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## »» Collaborators

All Alaskans have a stake in building a statewide system that provides and supports quality early learning at home and in away-from-home programs. Many of our most prominent corporations and nonprofit and philanthropic organizations understand both the implications of success and the consequences of inaction.

These entities are collaborating on the unique public-private partnership that is Best Beginnings. Without them, it would not be possible. With them, everything is possible.

### »» Major Supporters

*The major supporters below have made multi-year commitments of funding or other resources.*

Alaska Public Telecommunications, Inc.  
BP  
ConocoPhillips  
Smart Start's National Technical Assistance Center  
State of Alaska  
United Way of Anchorage

### »» Friends & Allies

*The following organizations provide financial assistance or other valuable forms of support to Best Beginnings. Their collaboration is essential to the success of our shared mission.*

Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children  
Alaska Child Care Resource & Referral Network  
Alaska Children's Trust  
Alaska Democratic Party  
Alaska Head Start Association  
Alaska Humanities Forum  
Buster Consulting & Communications  
Child Care Connection, Inc.  
First Alaskans Institute  
Information Insights  
National Conference of State Legislatures  
National Governors Association  
Rasmuson Foundation  
Raven Management Consulting  
Rural Alaska Community Action Program, Inc.  
Shell Oil Company  
The CIRI Foundation  
University of Alaska Anchorage  
University of Alaska Fairbanks College of Rural & Community Development  
University of Alaska Southeast System for Early Education Development (SEED)



## >>> Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Task Force

The work of Best Beginnings is guided by the recommendations of Alaska's Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Task Force. The Task Force recommendations fall into three categories: home, outside the home, and looking ahead:

### **In the Home**

- >> Increase the engagement of parents, grandparents, and extended family in their child's learning by providing resources and incentives.
- >> Develop and increase access to quality, culturally engaging reading materials.
- >> Increase access to proven, family centered literacy programs by partnering with other organizations.

### **Out of the Home in Child Care & Early Education Programs**

- >> Distribute Alaska's Early Learning Guidelines (ELGs) in family friendly formats.
- >> Implement a quality rating system (QRS) to help parents evaluate child care and early learning programs and to guide program improvement.
- >> Increase the professional development opportunities and qualifications for early childhood educators and provide appropriate compensation.
- >> Develop a statewide system of voluntary and affordable early childhood education with options available for children and families in all communities.

### **Looking Ahead**

- >> Create a commission, council, public-private consortium, or other entity to implement Task Force recommendations.
- >> Develop a multi-year work plan for implementing recommendations.
- >> Educate Alaskans about the social imperative of preparing children from birth to age 6 to be ready to read and learn.
- >> Ensure future funding from private, nonprofit, foundation, and government sources.



## »» Best Beginnings Staff

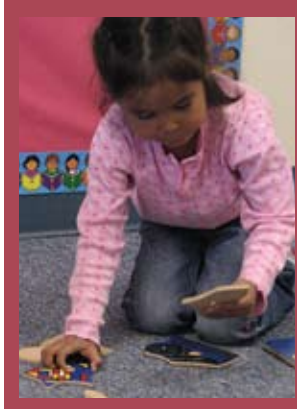
Abbe Hensley	Executive Director
Melinda Myers	Senior Manager
Carmin Sponseller	Administrative Coordinator

## »» Early Learning Council

Susan Anderson	President & CEO, The CIRI Foundation
Margaret Bauer	Director, Work Life Services, Providence Health & Services Alaska
Deborah Bonito	President, Sourdough Mercantile, Inc.
Steve Brezenski	Regional HR Manager, Carrs Safeway
Michele Brown	President & CEO, United Way of Anchorage
Carol Comeau	Superintendent, Anchorage School District
Ronnie Dent	Director of Programming, KAKM, Alaska Public Telecommunications, Inc.
Sharon Gagnon, Ph.D.	Advocate, Early Childhood Literacy and Learning
Ernie Hall	Owner & Manager, Alaska Furniture Manufacturing, Inc.
Sue Hull	Member, Fairbanks North Star Borough School Board
Bernice Joseph	Executive Dean, College of Rural & Community Development, University of Alaska Fairbanks
Edna MacLean	President Emeritus, Ilisagvik College
AnneMarie Mattacchione	Alaska Head Start Association
Brad McKim	Managing Attorney, BP Exploration Alaska
Ira Perman	President, Important Work
Cathryn Rasmuson	Trustee, Rasmuson Foundation
Sarah Scanlan	Deputy Director, RurAL CAP
Barbara Thompson	Commissioner, Alaska Department of Education & Early Development
Stephanie Wheeler	Executive Director, Alaska Office of Faith-Based & Community Initiatives
David Wight	President & CEO, Retired, Alyeska Pipeline Service Company
Candace Winkler	President & CEO, Child Care Connection, Inc.

»» Photos on pages 7 (lower), 9, 10, 13, inside back cover (lower) are courtesy of the Southcentral Foundation Head Start.

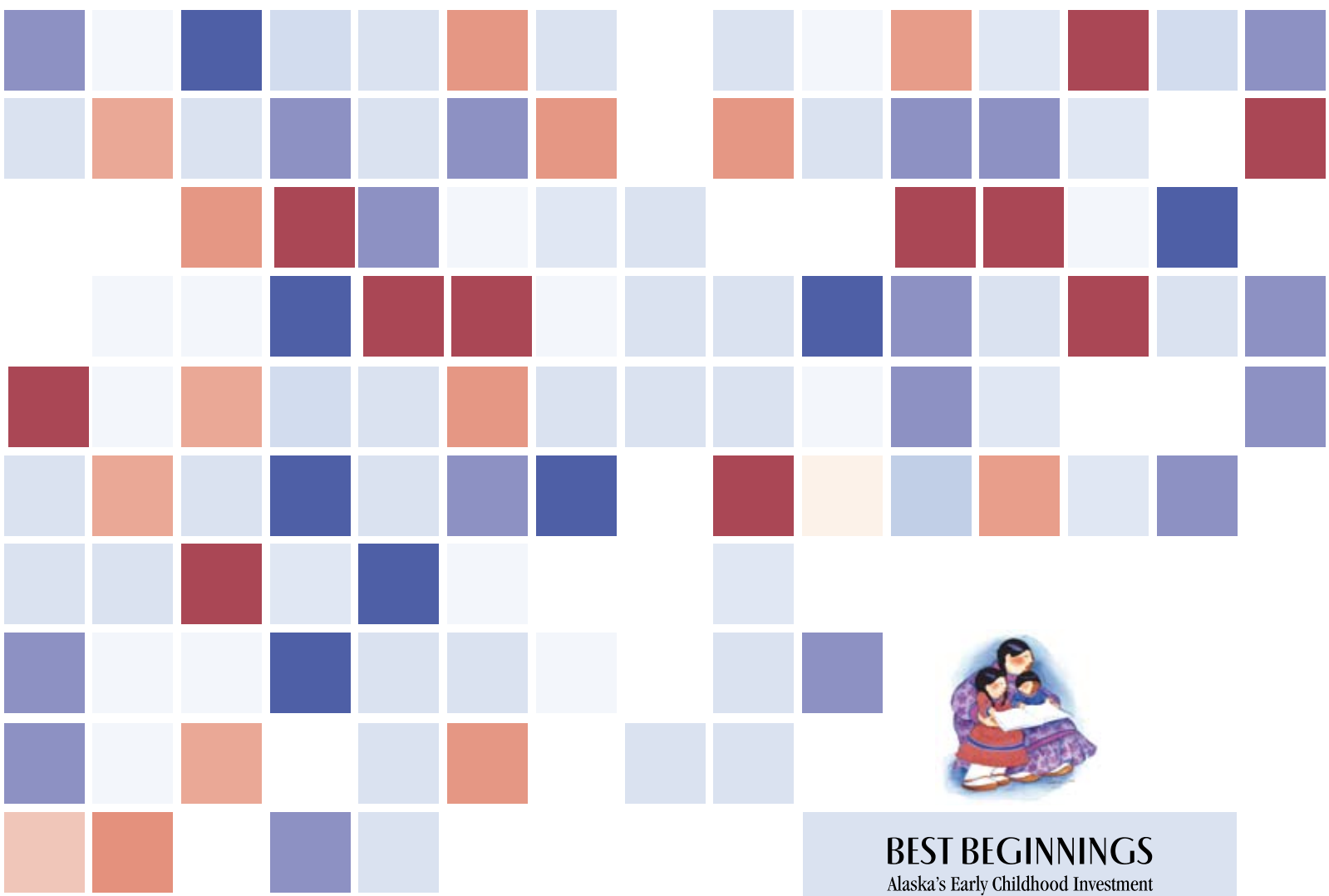




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