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Relationships, Resources and Results: Highlights of Key Informant Interviews

Zero-to-Four Early Learning Expansion Study



A project of the WEST VIRGINIA
**Early Childhood
Planning** TASK FORCE

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Relationships, Resources and Results: Highlights of Key Informant Interviews

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Introduction

Numerous studies confirm that returns on investments in human development are highest during the first few years of life. West Virginia is a leader in the nation in the development of universal Pre-K for four-year-olds. Like most states, however, West Virginia's programs for the youngest children (birth through three years old) are limited by categorical eligibility, inadequate funding and, in some cases, insufficient quality to achieve the desired child outcomes.

The Zero-to-Four Early Learning Expansion Study aims to identify ways to *increase high-quality early learning opportunities for children under four years old in group settings*, particularly Head Start, Pre-K, child care centers and facilities, and family child care homes. The West Virginia Early Childhood Planning Task Force is conducting the study in conjunction with Collective Impact, LLC. Additional research is being done with home visitation and Birth to Three programs, which is not included in this report.

Related research

The Zero-to-Four Study is an extension of earlier work commissioned by the Task Force to solicit input from a broad range of stakeholders on a plan to strengthen the state's early childhood system. More than 1,200 West Virginians participated in surveys and discussion groups in 2013. Among the survey respondents, 41 percent were parents of young children and 50 percent worked for local early childhood programs.



Parents of young children who responded to the survey were asked to identify what, if any, problems they had accessing early childhood services. Three out of ten parents said they had no problems. Nearly a third reported concerns about the quality of available services, and a quarter had difficulty finding information about programs in their area. Other significant barriers included the cost of some services, hours that did not meet family needs, services that were either unavailable or too far away, and difficulty finding programs that could meet their children's special needs.



Another major concern raised in the discussion groups and surveys was a shortage of services in general from prenatal through age three, such as infant and toddler child care and home visitation programs. Many cited the lack of services for some children when they “age out” of the Birth to Three program, which serves children who have or are at risk of developmental delays. Children who don't have sufficient delays to qualify for three-year-old Pre-K for children with special needs must wait a year until they're eligible for universal four-year-old Pre-K.

For further details, see *Stakeholder Survey and Discussions: Summary of Findings*, prepared by Collective Impact, LLC, at http://www.wvecptf.org/docs/Stakeholder_report_final%20-%20single%20page.pdf.

Methodology

Key informant interviews were conducted from April through June 2014 with 39 individuals who work in early childhood programs and agencies. They included 32 people who directed or coordinated local programs and seven people who worked for state agencies or statewide organizations that focus on early childhood development. The study used a participatory research design in which the interviewees were selected from four sectors, based on suggestions from each sector:

- Child care, including seven child care center directors, five operators of family child care homes (FCCs), and two people who work or have worked in child care at the state level.
- Family Resource Networks (FRNs) and Family Resource Centers (FRCs), including eight people who direct or coordinate local FRNs and FRCs.
- Head Start, including six local program directors and two people who work or have worked in Head Start at the state level.
- Pre-K, including six county-level Pre-K coordinators and three people who work or have worked in Pre-K at the state level.

Five interviewers were recruited to conduct interviews in the sectors in which they had expertise. The interviewers were Nikki Darling-Kuria, a training specialist with the national Zero to Three organization and former family child care home provider in Berkeley County; Jane Haddox, director of Early Education Station in Mason County and board member of WV Child Care Centers United; Gerry Sawrey, former assistant superintendent of Cabell County Schools, who oversaw the development of the county's Pre-K program; Leslie Stone, owner of Stone Strategies and former technical assistance specialist for FRNs with the Governor's Cabinet on Children and Families; and

Karen Williams, former director of Kanawha County Head Start and member of the WV Head Start Association. The interviews were conducted by phone, recorded and transcribed. The interviews followed a protocol with six open-ended questions and typically lasted 40-60 minutes. The interviewers prepared summaries of their findings and met to share and compare what they learned across sectors. Bruce Decker of Collective Impact, LLC, facilitated the meeting, and Julie Pratt, Task Force Project Director, wrote this report.

This report highlights the observations and recommendations made most often during the interviews. The comments included were expressed by multiple interviewees, but do not represent a consensus of all interviewees.



PART I:

Interviewees' Assessment of Current Efforts

1) The programs included in this study hold similar core beliefs regarding early childhood development, including:

- a) *Support for evidence-based programs and continuous quality improvement*, based on research about early brain development, as well as program policies and practices that have been shown to result in positive outcomes for children and families.
- b) *Support for the “whole child”* that focuses not only on cognitive development, but also on health, physical development and social and emotional skills. Children need learning strategies and environments that are developmentally appropriate. Some programs also emphasize the least restrictive setting for young children to facilitate learning.
- c) *Support for the “whole family”* that recognizes that child well-being is embedded in family well-being and that respects, engages and empowers families to be effective decision-makers and advocates for their children. Early childhood programs are part of a broader range of support that families need, which also includes affordable housing, health care and transportation.
- d) *Support for school readiness* as one of the desired outcomes of quality early childhood programs, with the concept of “readiness” applying to not only children, but also to families, communities and schools. Readiness focuses on the foundational skills that will help children learn what kindergarten will teach them, based on WV’s early learning standards for 3- and 4-year-olds in social and emotional development, language and literacy, mathematics, science, the arts, and physical health and development.

2) The programs studied bring different perspectives and contributions to the overall early childhood system and operate under different governing bodies.

- a) *Child care programs* have a long history of supporting parents who need safe and nurturing places for their children while the parents work. Over time, the value of child care as an early learning program has been increasingly recognized, but program standards and funding have not risen to meet these higher expectations. The child care providers who were interviewed support higher quality standards, but cannot achieve them without the funding and training needed to recruit, support and retain qualified staff.
- b) *Head Start programs* have a long history of providing center and home-based services to children and families with the greatest needs, as well as empowering parents as decision-makers and advocates. It is

the only early childhood program in WV that is funded directly and exclusively by the federal government. The Head Start providers and FRN/FRC coordinators interviewed are concerned about the instability and changing focus of federal funding and about state policies or policy interpretations that are inconsistent with federal policies, putting Head Start programs at risk of federal sanctions.

- c) *WV Pre-K* is the only free, non-categorical early childhood program available statewide, with enrollment rates among the highest in the nation. Its focus is on school readiness, broadly defined to include all domains of development. Three-quarters of Pre-K classrooms use a collaborative model involving schools, Head Start programs and/or child care centers. The Pre-K providers interviewed expressed the need for increased funding per student enrolled, transportation, and improvements in the collaborative model.

3) **Collaboration is widely valued and frequently practiced in the early childhood community.**

- a) *Strong local collaborative groups* (e.g. Pre-K teams, FRNs) were viewed by many interviewees as essential to coordinating programs, implementing interagency initiatives, sharing resources, and securing funding to address service system gaps.
- b) *Support for local collaboration* from state agencies and technical assistance providers is valued by many interviewees, although more follow-up with local programs is often needed than can be provided by existing technical assistance positions.
- c) *Time, transparency, trust and accountability* were frequently identified as critical factors in successful collaboration, particularly in the implementation of initiatives that involve sharing of financial and human resources.

4) **There are serious systemic challenges that impede early childhood collaboration.**

- a) *Family child care homes* (FCCs) lack recognition for their contributions to advancing early learning, even though they are the only regulated child care option in some rural parts of the state. FCCs are not included as Pre-K partners and often lack sufficient staff to send representatives to trainings and collaboration meetings during the day.
- b) *Conflicting policies and procedures* of state and federal agencies exist, as well as misinterpretations of them at the local level. For issues related to the State Board of Education's Policy 2525 for Pre-K, local Pre-K collaborative partners can contact the State Pre-K Team (which includes representatives from child care, Head Start and Pre-K) for technical assistance and policy clarification.
- c) *Differing personnel requirements and compensation across programs* strain collaboration. Public schools and Head Start programs hold four-year degrees as the minimum standard, while other programs offer a variety of pathways for staff to attain the skills needed to teach and support young children. Public schools pay higher wages, which creates turnover problems for other programs.
- d) *Real and perceived power imbalances in collaborative groups* can undermine trust, relationships and effectiveness. Many child care and Head Start interviewees felt that their collaboration concerns, especially in Pre-K, have not always been adequately addressed, and there is no neutral party (beyond the Pre-K Team) to whom they can take disputes for further review and resolution.



- e) *Interpersonal challenges* can derail collaboration in terms of broken confidentiality, personality conflicts and poor communication. Changes in membership of local Pre-K core teams can also be a challenge to collaboration.

5) There is a funding crisis in private-sector early childhood programs that jeopardizes program access, quality and sustainability.

- a) *Federal funding and state policies challenge Head Start*, including the 2013 federal sequestration; reduction of centers/classrooms as 4-year-olds enrolled in Pre-K, with services provided by Head Start in school-based classrooms; the inability to identify and count Head Start-eligible children when families choose not to disclose their incomes on the universal Pre-K application; and lack of sufficient revenues to pay competitive wages and benefits, as well as the increase in the state minimum wage.
- b) *Multiple factors undermine the financial viability of child care*, including the limits on what parents can afford to pay for child care; limits on family income eligibility for child care subsidies; child care subsidy rates that are less than 75 percent of market rate; a 2012 increase in family co-payments for child care subsidies, which drove some families out of the regulated child care market; the loss of 4-year-olds in some child care programs due to Pre-K; and lack of revenues needed to pay competitive wages and benefits, as well as the increase in the state minimum wage. No adjustment in child care subsidy reimbursement rates has been made to address the minimum wage increase.
- c) *Many FCC providers earn less than minimum wage*, including some with college degrees, due to low child care subsidy reimbursement rates and their non-inclusion as a Pre-K partner.
- d) *Lack of funding for a Quality Rating and Improvement System with incentive payments*, on top of the insufficient base funding for child care, makes it impossible for most programs to attain the quality needed to achieve the desired child outcomes.
- e) *The bottom line is that young children are missing out* on critical opportunities for early development. The ripple effects include fewer children who are ready for kindergarten, fewer children who are proficient in reading by the third grade, and fewer youth who graduate from high school.



PART 2:

Interviewees' Recommendations for the Future

1) Focus on child and family needs and outcomes.

- a) Engage, support and respect families in all aspects of early childhood programming.
- b) Utilize evidence-based, developmentally appropriate practices across all settings.
- c) Create an integrated data system to measure program and system outcomes for children and families across all early childhood settings.

2) Improve and sustain the quality of existing programs.

- a) Include family child care as an essential early learning program for children who do better in small settings and/or whose families live in rural areas.
- b) Continue to address concerns about non-alignment or the perception of non-alignment of quality standards across early childhood programs.

- c) Fully implement a Quality Rating and Improvement System.
- d) Support continuous quality improvement in all programs.
- e) Provide training and support across all programs to enhance the social and emotional development of young children.
- f) Collaborate with higher education, career technology education centers and other training and technical assistance providers to (1) assure a qualified workforce and appropriate credentialing for those working with children from birth through three years old and (2) enhance cross-program training and preparation.
- g) Assure that all programs are able to recruit and retain qualified staff by reducing disparities in salaries and benefits and raising program funding levels to implement the increase in the state minimum wage.
- h) Address local concerns and provide technical assistance regarding the implementation of the Pre-K policy change to increase classes from four to five days per week. Some also suggested delaying the increase in days.

3) Coordinate current programs and maximize resources.

- a) Assure that family income is included on universal Pre-K applications in all counties in order to identify and refer income-eligible families to Head Start.
- b) Reduce the daily transitions of Pre-K children between school and afterschool settings through more co-location of those services.
- c) Create a neutral state-level entity and process for reviewing and resolving differences that aren't satisfactorily resolved by local Pre-K teams or the State Pre-K Team.
- d) Create single or coordinated points of entry for families to learn about and access early childhood programs.

4) Create stable, sufficient funding mechanisms.

- a) Provide a durable and predictable funding stream for all early childhood programs, as the school aid funding formula does for Pre-K.
- b) Use WVDE guidelines among all Pre-K partners regarding funding, contracts and budget for collaborative classrooms, available at http://static.k12.wv.us/oel/docs/WV_Pre-K_Partnerships_Collaborating_with_Community_Partnerships_2012.pdf.
- c) Raise school aid funding for Pre-K students to 2.0 FTE to compensate boards of education and their collaborative partners for the added costs associated with required higher teacher-to-student ratios, as well as the frequent replenishment of materials and equipment associated with the program.
- d) Raise base child care reimbursement rates, including adjustments for the increase in the state minimum wage; fully implement a tiered payment system that rewards and pays for quality; and expand income eligibility for child care subsidies.
- e) Encourage all county collaborative team members to be transparent about their funding so teams can develop a sound financial plan for funding the WV Pre-K program.

5) Expand early childhood programs to address unmet needs.

- a) Expansion plans for all early childhood programs should be based on evidence-based practices and the needs of young children and their families.
- b) Program expansion should include up-front planning to maximize all available resources; fully involve all stakeholders, including



parents; consider the impact on all programs; take into account the unique needs, resources and capacity of each county, allowing for flexible implementation of services.

- c) Funding for program expansion should be based on the cost of meeting quality standards for staff, curriculum, environment and family services, as well as address access issues, such as transportation.
- d) Plans to expand/improve early learning in group settings for three-year-olds should focus primarily on Head Start programs, child care centers and facilities, and family child care homes, due to the lack of school space in many counties and the preference of many families for smaller facilities for very young children.
- e) State level agencies should continue to model the collaboration expected at the local level and provide support to local teams as plans for service expansion move forward.



CONCLUSION

Taken together, the interviews capture the remarkable progress West Virginia has made in developing programs for young children. Quotes from three of the interviewees are featured in the upcoming education issue of *West Virginia Executive* magazine (August 2014) about lessons learned from the development of universal Pre-K for four-year-olds:



"We have a Pre-K model that says we're going to work toward quality and we're going to do it together," says Clayton Burch, executive director of the Office of Early Learning in the West Virginia Department of Education. "We're going to honor existing programs. We're going to honor where children and families are in the community. We're going to honor the current work force, and through this process we are going to keep our eyes on the prize."



While West Virginia may not be where it needs to be, Marlene Midget, executive director of Northern Panhandle Head Start, says the state is in a better place than it was when these efforts began. "We've spent 12 years educating people and getting people onboard," she says. "There's no way you can have a quality early childhood Pre-K program without everyone at the table."



When Charlene Zirk, executive director of the Hardy County Child Care Center, began her career in child care some 28 years ago, she recalls that it was just about teaching children their colors and their ABCs. "Most centers today provide a very challenging curriculum for all of their children," she says. "I feel that that's extremely important, as well as the development of children's social and emotional skills."



The interviews also capture the formidable challenges programs face in developing and sustaining high-quality early childhood services that are accessible to all families who need them. Three common threads ran through the interviews that are important to consider as West Virginia works toward a stronger system and better outcomes for our state's youngest children:

- *Relationships* are the lynchpin for creating an effective and responsive system. These include the relationships program providers have with the children and families they serve, with other programs in their community, and with the state and federal agencies that fund their efforts. The relationships take time, transparency and trust to build and maintain. Support for meaningful parent involvement, strong local collaboration and effective communication among partners at all levels is essential.
- *Resources* – knowledge, people and funding – are needed to create and sustain high-quality programs. Coordinating and maximizing those resources are critical for an efficient, productive system. The chronic shortage and instability of funding in the nonprofit sector place those programs and the families they serve in a state of uncertainty and risk. In addition to shoring up funding overall, efforts are needed to reduce wage disparities between public and non-profit sectors and the resulting high turnover in staff among nonprofit agencies.
- *Results* and the ability to measure them are key to creating an early childhood system that gives all young children and their families the opportunity to thrive. This requires a system for assuring quality across programs, including the provision of evidence-based and developmentally appropriate services for young children. Also needed is an integrated data system across programs to track child and system outcomes, identify and implement needed improvements, and be accountable to families, funders and the public.

Acknowledgments

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The Task Force was created by Governor Earl Ray Tomblin in May 2013 and charged with developing a plan to strengthen the state's early childhood system. The plan will be completed in the fall of 2014. All research and other reports from the Task Force are available at www.wvecptf.org.

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