

The Foundation for Enhancing Communities

Early Childhood Needs Assessment Report

November 2016



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **02**

The Opportunity	02
The Context	02

NEEDS ASSESSMENT APPROACH **05**

Community Partners	05
Family Survey	06
Focus Groups	06

FINDINGS **09**

Support for Early Learning Skill Development	09
Knowledge of & Access to Early Childhood Programs	11
Outreach & Partnerships with Early Childhood Programs	17

RECOMMENDATIONS **22**

Strategies for Families	22
Strategies for Early Learning Providers	25
Strategies for the Community	27

CONCLUSION **28**

APPENDIX **29**

REFERENCES **40**

School Readiness Consulting
912 Thayer Ave, Suite 209
Silver Spring, MD 20910
877.447.0327
schoolreadinessconsulting.com

INTRODUCTION

THE OPPORTUNITY

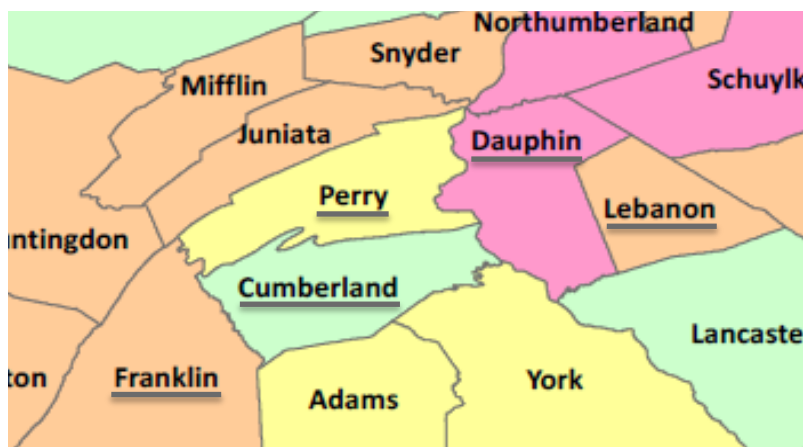
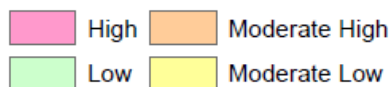
Over the last few decades, there has been an expanding body of research that demonstrates the benefits of early childhood education to children's development. Evidence has shown that high-quality early learning programs can significantly influence children's development of cognitive, linguistic, physical, and social-emotional skills providing the solid foundation needed for school and lifelong success.¹ A key element of The Foundation for Enhancing Communities (TFEC) mission is to contribute to the advancement of early childhood education in a five-county region of South Central Pennsylvania. To achieve this goal, TFEC focuses on making strategic community-level investments in programs to promote parent engagement with a focus on Kindergarten readiness and to meet the needs of families not yet connected to early childhood programming and services. Before identifying and investing in programs that would help families become empowered and prepare their children for Kindergarten, TFEC seeks to better understand the decision making of families. In response, TFEC collaborated with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) and selected community partners to conduct an in-depth needs assessment that documents the existing opportunities along with the challenges faced by families with young children accessing early childhood education, including cultural, economic, and geographic barriers. Findings and recommendations developed as a result of the needs assessment have been created to guide TFEC's grant-making program in order to build upon strengths and address the unique issues facing underserved families in the targeted five-county region. Through this collaboration, TFEC seeks to leverage this effort to ultimately improve access to quality early learning opportunities for all young children in South Central Pennsylvania.

THE CONTEXT

Through its grant-making efforts, TFEC serves the South Central Pennsylvania counties of Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Lebanon, Perry, and the Dillsburg Area. Recent studies of this focal area have shed light on the stark reality faced by many of the children and families residing in these communities. Of the existing research, one key study was the 2013-2014 Program Reach and Risk Assessment conducted by the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), which provides an initial picture of the challenges or "risk factors" facing young children and families in TFEC's focal areas, and the availability or "reach" of early childhood programming as a support. Findings from the assessment revealed the high percentages of families with young children impacted by a wide range of risk factors in each of the target communities, including risks associated with economic status, maternal education, birth outcomes, academic achievement, and toxic stress. Taking all of these indicators into account, researchers were able to rank each county on overall risk and determined Cumberland as low risk and Perry as moderately low risk, while Franklin and Lebanon were rated as moderately high risk and Dauphin as high risk.²

FIGURE 1. AVERAGE RISK LEVEL BY COUNTY FOR FISCAL YEAR 2013-2014

Risk Level

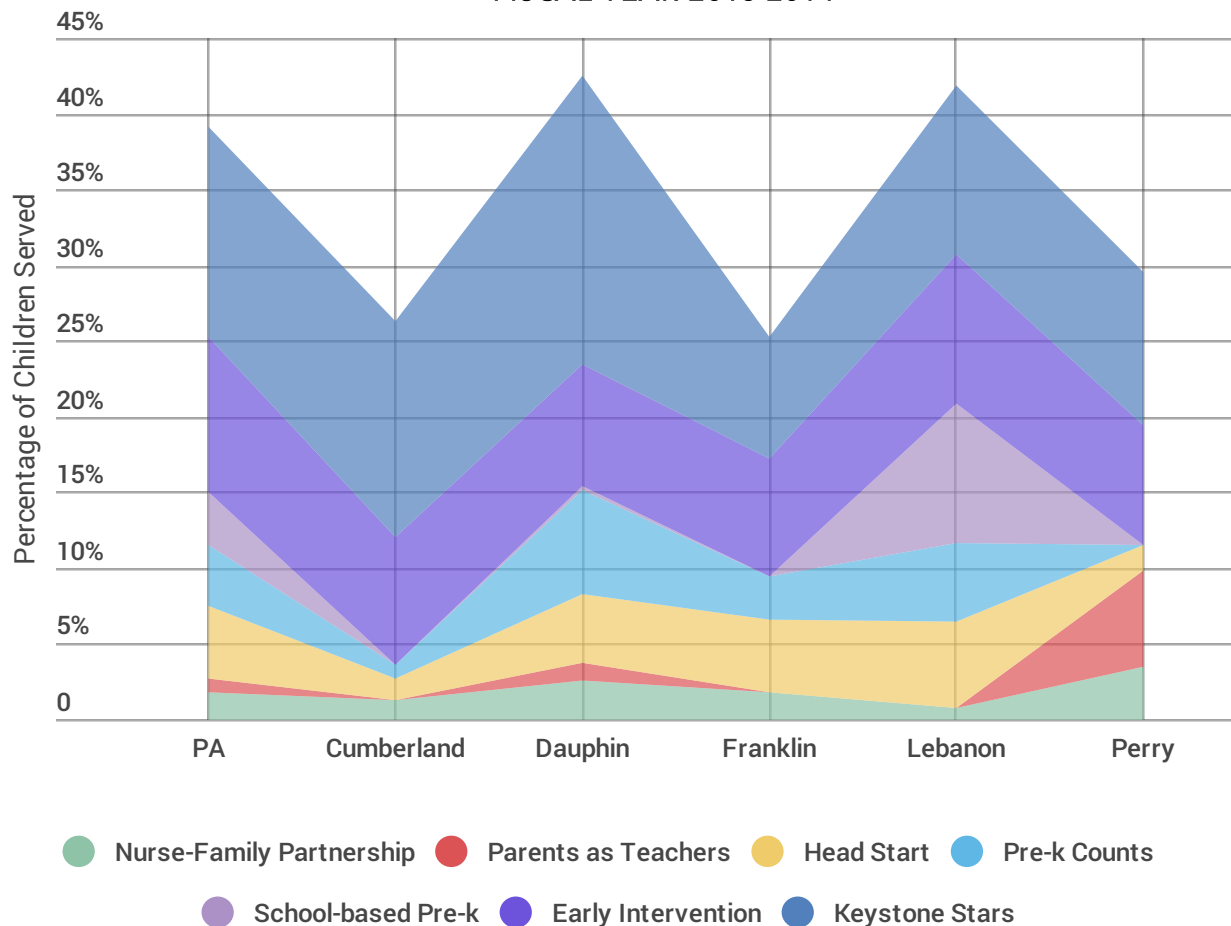


Source: Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning. (2016). Program Reach and Risk Assessment State Fiscal Year 2013-2014. Retrieved from <http://www.pakeys.org/uploadedContent/Docs/ELinPA/OCDEL/Reach%20and%20Risk%202013-14%20FINAL%2002262016.pdf>

Additionally, the assessment provided key information regarding the use of (as well as the lack of access to) the major state and federally-funded early learning programs and services for children under the age of five and their

families across the five-county region of South Pennsylvania. Overall, the assessment suggested that all early learning programming combined were reaching 34% of children under age five statewide. Furthermore, findings revealed that program reach was relatively the greatest in high-risk counties (42%), and children and families from both urban (32%) and rural (38%) communities are accessing some level of services. Of all the PA early learning investments, the Keystone STARS program is reaching the highest percentage of children from infancy to preschool age, however currently only serves an estimated 14% of children across the state. This trend remains consistent as the Keystone STARS program is also reaching the highest percentage of young children in TFEC's focal area. In general, findings from the assessment suggest that publicly-funded early childhood programs are reaching and serving young children both across the targeted communities and statewide, but there are gaps that exist in providing access to high-quality programming and services to all families, particularly those considered at-risk.³

FIGURE 2. REACH OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS BY COUNTY FOR FISCAL YEAR 2013-2014



Source: Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning. (2016). Program Reach and Risk Assessment State Fiscal Year 2013-2014. Retrieved from <http://www.pakeys.org/uploadedContent/Docs/ELinPA/OCDEL/Reach%20and%20Risk%202013-14%20FINAL%2002262016.pdf>

Another recent study - 2014 United Way Community Assessment - offers additional evidence confirming the existing gaps in early childhood programming and services. This community assessment examined several parts of the region that TFEC serves, and found that more than 75% of children ages 3 and 4 in Cumberland (79%), Dauphin (75%) and Perry (92%) counties are without access to high-quality, pre-kindergarten programming.⁴ To that end, these studies support the need for additional investment in this five-county region to ensure young children and families have access to the high-quality early childhood services that lead to positive outcomes. Through this targeted effort, TFEC will be able to further examine the existing barriers for families disconnected from early childhood resources and use findings to inform future grant-making efforts as the catalyst for change in South Central Pennsylvania.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT APPROACH

TFEC engaged SRC to conduct an in-depth needs assessment to understand the unique issues facing underserved families disconnected to early childhood programs and services in the five-county region of South Central Pennsylvania. To guide this work, a set of framing questions was developed in order to identify specific areas in which TFEC is interested in building understanding of families experiences accessing early childhood programming, and to inform the needs assessment approach, data collection events, and ultimately the final set of recommendations (See Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR NEEDS ASSESSMENT

1. What academic and social skills do parents believe their children should have before entering kindergarten?
2. In what ways are parents already engaging their young children in skill-building, learning and education at home?
3. What are the experiences of families who have attempted to access educational services and programs?
4. What are the experiences of preschool centers and agencies that serve or seek to serve families without access to early education?
5. What early childhood programs and services are parents aware of in their community? What do they know about these entities? How did they find out about these programs and services?
6. What other early childhood programs and services exist in the community?
7. What barriers have families faced in accessing early childhood programming and services?
8. How would families prefer to find and work with early childhood programs and professionals to prepare their children for kindergarten?
9. What will not work for families looking to access and work with early childhood programs and professionals?
10. What successful strategies have preschool centers and agencies utilized to reach families not connected to early education?

The resulting needs assessment process involved collaboration with local community partners to complete a series of targeted surveys and focus groups with both families and early childhood providers in each of the counties.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

In order to effectively connect with and learn from families not accessing early childhood resources in the identified focal areas, a localized strategy needed to be developed and employed. As a result, TFEC sought out community partners that hold important relationships and/or provide direct services to families that 1) have children three to five years old who are not currently enrolled in preschool education; 2) experience barriers to accessing formal or affordable preschool; and 3) who may lack support or resources to prepare their children for Kindergarten or elementary school. In addition to the connections with families, community partners needed to have significant relationships with the early childhood providers and leaders in each of the counties. Four community partners were ultimately selected to engage in the needs assessment process - Lebanon Valley Family YMCA; Perry County Literacy Council; Salvation Army Harrisburg Capital City Region; and YWCA Carlisle. As a key supporter of this work, each community partner worked to leverage their connections to support data collection efforts through 1) distribution of a family survey and; 2) convening both families and early childhood providers for focus groups in order for TFEC to learn more from multiple perspectives about the existing barriers to accessing early childhood education in the targeted five-country region.

FAMILY SURVEY

To support outreach and data collection efforts, SRC developed a family survey that included 1) a short section describing the purpose and instructions for completing the survey; and 2) a series of questions that will assist with collecting both demographic data and perceptions about access to early childhood programming and services in the focal communities (See Appendix). The family survey was shared with the four community partners to distribute, collect, and return to SRC for data analysis. Through this surveying effort, the overarching goal was to collect information from families with children of preschool age in the targeted five-county region. When possible, outreach was ideally focused on collecting information from families that are often not fully engaged in early childhood programs and services, such as families experiencing income and racial inequalities, families who primarily speak a language other than English, families that have recently migrated to the U.S., and families of children with special needs.

147 families participated in a voluntary survey from across the focal region, with a majority of the participants living in Dauphin County (44%) and Lebanon County (37%). Most of the respondents were mothers of young children (76%) with the next closest respondent being fathers (9%). The surveys were distributed to families with some variance in the range of racial/ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds represented (See Figure 4). Additionally, families participating in the survey reported accessing and utilizing a variety of formal early learning services in the community, including public school pre-k programs; Early Head Start/Head Start; other center-based programs (e.g., child care center, nursery school, etc.); home-based programs; and home visiting – with center-based programs being the most widely used (25%). At the same time, a majority of families reported that their children were spending most of their time during their day in non-formal care arrangements, such as at home (35%) or with a family, neighbor, or friend (8%).

FOCUS GROUPS

In addition to the family survey, focus groups were also conducted to further collect information from families, along with early childhood providers. The focus of outreach for the family focus groups was similar as with the surveying effort. Families were invited to participate who were not currently accessing early childhood programming, and/or those who were accessing programs, but may be experiencing barriers in finding high-quality early childhood programs. Participation was also open to select families who had accessed high-quality early learning programming where community partners thought it would be helpful to hear their perspectives, but it was not the primary focus.

Focus group sessions for early childhood providers were geared toward gathering information from professionals providing early learning services to young children (with a focus on ages 3 to 5) and their families. Participants invited to the focus groups included **licensed providers** (e.g., center-based and family child care centers); **school district professionals** (e.g., principals, preschool teachers, and school social workers); and **human service/community providers** (e.g., home visitors, early intervention and special education providers).

Planning and coordination for the focus groups was a collaborative process. Outreach and other key logistics for the focus groups were led by each of the community partners, with support from SRC and TFEC. A focus group protocol was additionally developed to guide focus group discussions with input from community partners and TFEC (See Appendix). 9 total focus groups were conducted between the community partner sites - 5 of which were family focus groups and 4 of which were early childhood provider focus groups. In aggregate, 45 family members participated along with 47 early childhood providers in the focus groups. Exit surveys were also distributed at the conclusion of each session to collect demographic information about participants. As seen with the family survey, families and early childhood providers exhibited some variance with the range of racial/ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds represented (See Figure 4). Most of the family focus group participants were mothers of young children (61%) with the next closest participant being fathers (17%). Also similar to the family survey responses, families reported utilizing a variety of formal early learning services, however the majority reported their children were spending most of their time in non-formal care arrangements - mainly either at home (61%) or with a family, neighbor, or friend (17%). Participants in the early childhood provider focus groups represented a range of programs, including public school pre-k programs (21%); Early

Head Start/Head Start (23%); other center-based programs (25%); home-based programs (11%); early intervention or special education services (9%); and home visiting (4%).

**FIGURE 4. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF FAMILY SURVEY RESPONDENTS
& FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS**

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS	FAMILY SURVEY		FAMILY FOCUS GROUP ^{VII}		ECE PROVIDER FOCUS GROUP	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Race/Ethnicity of Respondent^I						
White or Caucasian	67	44%	12	32%	38	75%
Black or African American	52	34%	15	40%	5	10%
Hispanic or Latino	21	14%	5	13%	5	10%
Multi-Racial	6	4%	5	13%	2	4%
Asian or Pacific Islander	3	2%	0	0%	1	2%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1	0.7%	1	3%	0	0%
Other ^{II}	1	0.7%	0	0%	0	0%
Language(s) Spoken^{III}						
English	136	87%	36	95%	47	96%
Spanish	14	9%	1	3%	2	4%
French	3	2%	0	0%	0	0%
Arabic	2	1%	0	0%	0	0%
Chinese	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Japanese	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Korean	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Vietnamese	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Other ^{IV}	1	0.6%	1	3%	0	0%
Annual Income of Household^V						
\$0-\$20,000	55	37%	13	36%	---	---
\$20,001-\$50,000	35	24%	10	28%	---	---
\$50,001-\$70,000	16	11%	5	14%	---	---
\$70,001 and up	31	21%	5	14%	---	---
Level of Education^{VI}						
High School or GED	---	---	---	---	3	6%
Child Development Associate degree (CDA)	---	---	---	---	2	4%
Associates degree	---	---	---	---	4	9%
Bachelors degree	---	---	---	---	21	45%
Masters degree	---	---	---	---	13	28%
Doctoral degree	---	---	---	---	2	4%
Other	---	---	---	---	2	4%

^I 6 respondents on family survey; 2 participants in family focus group; and 4 participants in early childhood provider focus group selected more than one race/ethnicity and were represented in total count and percentage

^{II} "Other" response included "Morin-Afrika-Morocco"

^{III} 9 respondents of family survey; 2 participants in family focus group; and 2 participants in early childhood provider focus group spoke more than one language and were represented in total count and percentage

^{IV} "Other" responses included "German" and "Ghanain"

^V Optional question with 10 respondents of family survey (6.8%) and 3 participants in family focus group (8.3%) opting out of completing the question

^{VI} Question only on Early Childhood Provider Exit Survey - "Other" responses included "Some College" and "Trade School and Finishing College"

^{VII} Exit surveys were not collected and as a result, data was not incorporated from family focus groups at Perry County Literacy Council

Next steps in the needs assessment process involved analysis of the data collected from both survey responses (i.e., family survey and exit surveys) and focus group sessions. To analyze the survey data, SRC performed a descriptive data analysis and summarized survey data using data analysis and statistical software. To analyze the data from focus group sessions, SRC coded transcripts from each session using a coding scheme that was based on the guiding questions developed for this effort, and then reviewed the coded data in order to identify overarching themes that would be used to inform recommendations for TFEC's future grant-making. The use of multiple sources (e.g., both families and early childhood providers) allowed for triangulation of the data to help corroborate themes and phenomena that arose during the analysis.

FINDINGS

From analysis of data collected through the needs assessment process, three overarching themes emerged that provided insight into the guiding questions developed for this effort (See Figure 5). The following section summarizes information shared by both families and early childhood providers as it relates to each of the common themes.

FIGURE 5. RELATIONSHIP OF OVERARCHING THEMES TO GUIDING QUESTIONS

OVERARCHING THEMES	RELATED GUIDING QUESTIONS
1. Support for Early Learning Skill Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ What academic and social skills do parents believe their children should have before entering kindergarten?○ In what ways are parents already engaging their young children in skill-building, learning and education at home?
2. Knowledge of & Access to Early Childhood Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ What are the experiences of families who have attempted to access educational services and programs?○ What are the experiences of preschool centers and agencies that serve or seek to serve families without access to early education?○ What early childhood programs and services are parents aware of in their community? What do they know about these entities? How did they find out about these programs and services?○ What other early childhood programs and services exist in the community?○ What barriers have families faced in accessing early childhood programming and services?
3. Outreach & Partnerships with Early Childhood Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ How would families prefer to find and work with early childhood programs and professionals to prepare their children for kindergarten?○ What will not work for families looking to access and work with early childhood programs and professionals?○ What successful strategies have preschool centers and agencies utilized to reach families not connected to early education?

SUPPORT FOR EARLY LEARNING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

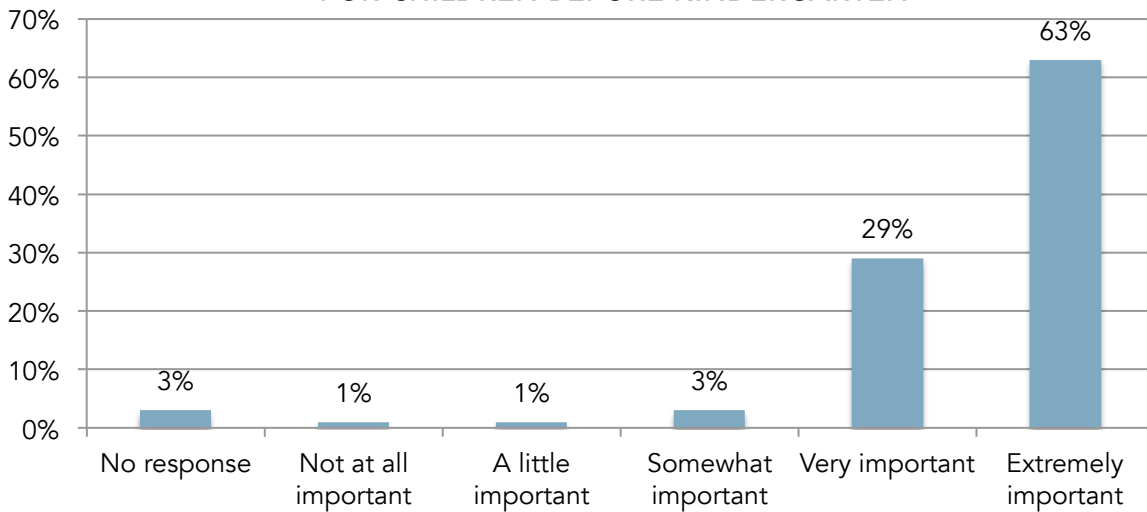
Overall, clear similarities were found between information shared by families and early learning providers as it relates to support for early learning skill development. However, the lack of a common definition for “Kindergarten readiness” may be contributing to miscommunication or uncertainty around preparing children for school.

BELIEFS ABOUT EARLY LEARNING SKILL DEVELOPMENT BEFORE KINDERGARTEN

In general, most families thought it was important for young children to have help with learning before Kindergarten – 29% of families surveyed thought it was “very important” and 63% of families thought it was “extremely important” (See Figure 6). During focus group sessions, both families and early childhood providers were aligned on their expectations of the specific types of skills children should acquire before entering Kindergarten. Family focus group participants referenced the importance of developing cognitive skills, such as those related to language and literacy (e.g., “knowing the alphabet”, “knowing their colors and shapes”, and “being able to write their name”); and mathematics (e.g., “being able to count up to 20”). Some families made reference to skills related to physical development, such as “potty-training”, “holding a pencil”, and being able to “cut with scissors.” Social-emotional skill development was also a significant thread in focus group discussions among family participants. Many families described the importance of not only academic skill development, but also the

importance of social, emotional, and communication skills among children. Many families referenced wanting their children to have opportunities to spend time around other children and “to socialize.”

FIGURE 6. FAMILIES REPORT ON IMPORTANCE OF EARLY LEARNING SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN BEFORE KINDERGARTEN



"I would say encouraging the communication and the social skills and the playing together is really important - not even so much the academics always. They'll pick that up in kindergarten and beyond. They'll have plenty of time to get that. I mean my kids have gotten that in preschool too, but I think encouraging the 'let's play together' and 'take turns', and 'get along and cooperate'.... My son's preschool was huge in him even learning responsibility and different things like that where I think he could learn those skills. He picked up the academic stuff, but that wasn't the focus for him at like three, four, and five."

- Family Member

Early childhood providers had similar responses to families regarding the importance of early learning skill development before Kindergarten, including references to language and literacy, mathematics, physical, and social-emotional skill development. As with families, significant emphasis was placed on the development of young children's social-emotional skills. For example, one provider shared "I always use to say that you could always teach the ABCs and 123s to a seven- or eight-year-old if you have to. But to teach them how to share and get along and be respectful - that's a lot harder to teach the older you get. I think that there's a huge gap in social-emotional learning in early childhood programs. Some do it really, really well, but I just don't think its made out to be as important as it should be." And another provider added, "Social skills. I would say as a school district that's what we focus on in our pre-K classroom more than academics is social skills. We don't have a lot of childcare centers so for our children, 95% of them, their first experience with school is Kindergarten. So socialization, sharing, things like that are key."

Early childhood providers additionally discussed the lack of consensus in defining "Kindergarten readiness" and the potential impact this has on communicating expectations with families. Accordingly, one provider stated, "I would like to see us get to a point where we can all agree on at least some things... depending on where you are, it's difficult to know what we mean when we say kindergarten readiness." This sentiment seemed to also be captured in comments by family members. Although many families were able to share their thoughts about important skill development for their children, there were also multiple references by families of not being completely clear about expectations for children before Kindergarten. For example, one family member shared, "When my son went to Kindergarten, he was my first and I wasn't sure what he was supposed to do... You don't want to over-teach them because then learning's not fun. But then you also don't want to stunt their growth... So it was like something I had to learn. I didn't know what he needed to know for kindergarten." Another family member added, "My five-year old, she can add and subtract numbers. But I know when she goes to Kindergarten that other kids aren't even going to know their name. Like how to read their own name. Although I think that it's just a not understanding. And that falls on the school district. Parents don't know what kids should know when they get to school-age."

FAMILY SUPPORT OF EARLY LEARNING SKILL DEVELOPMENT AT HOME

Although there seemed to be some miscommunication and feelings of uncertainty that exist around expectations for children before Kindergarten, most families discussed engaging in activities at home to support their children's skill development. Families discussed supporting cognitive skills, such as by reading to their children, teaching them their "ABCs and colors", and helping understand mathematical concepts via counting. Families additionally discussed supporting children's social emotional development. For example, one family member shared a story about supporting her daughter while she was learning how to express emotions – "One thing that works with my daughter. I mean she's only going on two, so she has a lot of tantrums and she's still exploring. But if she has a meltdown, I will just sit there and kind of give her a saying like, 'Why are you so sad?' She'll look at me just like, 'okay, now you know... you understand that I'm sad.' She'll calm down and try to explain what's making her upset. So that's one thing I'm trying to work with her on is her temper tantrums. When we go out, I believe at her age she can understand that you're not supposed to lash out or act out." Another common thread among the focus group discussions with families was related to experiential learning. Families discussed the importance of making use of everyday experiences and routines to support children's skill development. From helping with laundry, unloading the dishwasher, and participating with cooking, families described daily life experiences as key opportunities for learning and the need to be "intentional about what you expose them [children] to."

"I think the experiential stuff is so important. Just letting him be a part of your life. But then being with them and reading to them. Like I started reading to my kids when they were babies. Like before they understood what a book was and they could start and at least pick up and look at it. And then they would pick it up the correct way because they learned from early ages. So just reading I think reinforces that communication and that verbal learning. It's not even so much that you have to like do the things that a teacher would do even, but just read and just be with them. Provide experiences."

- Family Member

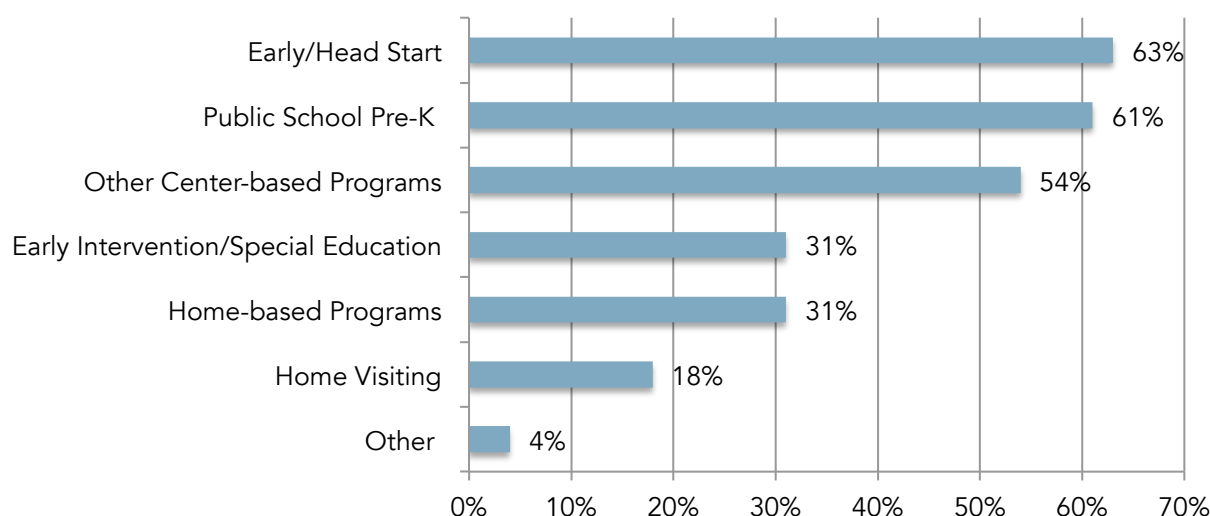
KNOWLEDGE OF & ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Based on information shared both via surveys and focus groups, families often rely on the use of personal networks and experiences to learn about available early learning programming in their communities, although various barriers exist to accessing such supports.

KNOWLEDGE OF EXISTING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Of the 147 families surveyed, approximately half of the respondents were aware of public school pre-K programs, Early Head Start and Head Start programs, and other center-based programs (e.g, child care centers, nursery schools, etc.) in their communities. Fewer families were aware of early intervention and special education, home-based programs, and home visiting programs that currently exist in their communities (See Figure 7). This trend was consistent throughout most focus group discussions with families. Of families with access to early learning programming, many shared their experiences with center-based programs and Early Head Start and Head Start, although there were few mentions of public school pre-K programs. Unique to the focus group discussions, families' connections to preschool programming offered through religious and/or faith-based institutions (e.g., churches) surfaced as common thread. For example, one family shared their experience with church-based preschools, "We moved to a different church-based preschool, but it functions more like a daycare. They have preschool hours, but then they also have extended hours for those who are working and can't just do the two-and-a-half hour thing. They're highly recognized among my peers, and the school district too, for actively preparing children." Similar to the survey responses, family focus group participants also shared their experiences with home-based programs, home visiting programs, and parent education programs, but not as frequently. Early intervention and special education services were highlighted throughout family focus group sessions – specifically issues related to lack of access - and will be discussed in detail further into this section. Additionally, families were aware of and discussed important programming and supports for their young children offered through informal learning institutions, such as libraries, museums, and parks. Information shared by early childhood providers of early childhood programs in the community aligned with family responses – most discussed their connection with public school pre-K programs, Early Head Start and Head Start programs, and other center-based programs. Early childhood providers also shared the important role of religious and faith-based institutions providing and/or connecting families to early childhood services.

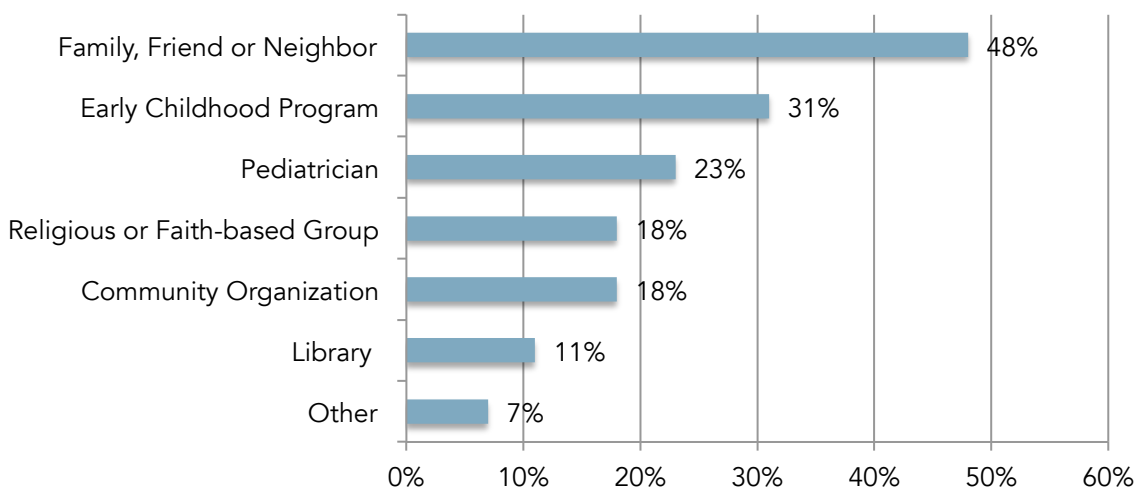
FIGURE 7. FAMILIES KNOWLEDGE OF EXISTING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN THE COMMUNITY



INFORMATION SOURCES FOR FAMILIES

Personal networks (e.g., family members, friends, and/or neighbors) were the main source for information and support for connecting families with early childhood programs in the community. Most respondents on the family survey and focus group participants reported learning about early childhood programs through “word of mouth”. One family member described the process as, “It’s only word of mouth. Like I feel like that’s how I’ve learned everything. But I don’t think word of mouth is enough.” In addition to using personal networks, families discussed learning about early childhood programs through internet searches and personal experiences (e.g., “just looking around” and making appointments to visit programs in the area). Although less frequently, more formal avenues were discussed by families as information sources for early childhood programs, such as government agencies (e.g., Child Care Information Service (CCIS), Child Care Network, and WIC offices), early childhood programs (e.g., Head Start), early intervention services (e.g., IUI3), and home visiting programs (Nurse-Family Partnership). Information collected from the family survey provided for a wider range of identified information sources, where families also shared about pediatricians, religious or faith-based groups, community organizations, and libraries as resources.

FIGURE 8. FAMILIES REPORT OF INFORMATION SOURCES FOR CONNECTING WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN THE COMMUNITY



"I think some of families, especially in our area, know from word of mouth. They might know someone who has children, and they ask, 'where can I take my kids?' So I think that a lot of it is word of mouth, having friends who take their kids to daycare... I did a survey and asked all of our families that question, and vast majority of them came back with word of mouth."

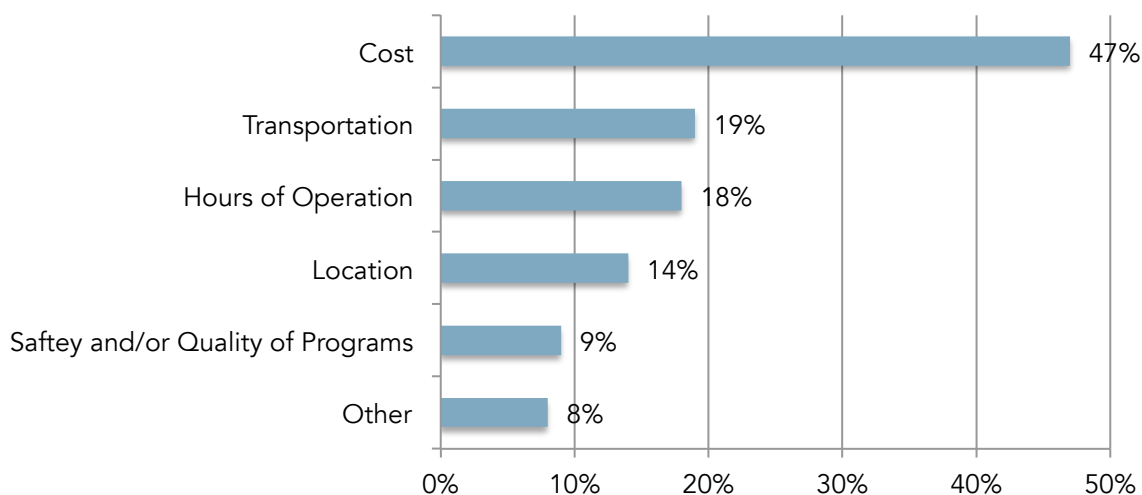
- Early Childhood Provider

Similar to the resources shared by families, early childhood providers described a range of sources of information that were available to families, including early childhood program referrals; health care agencies and pediatricians; and government agencies (e.g., CCIS, Child Care Network, etc.). Early childhood providers also echoed families' use of personal networks as "the most prevalent ways that families learn" about early childhood programs in the community. At the same time, early childhood providers also referred to other resources that families did not mention either through surveying or in focus groups. Some examples include community organizations/initiatives (e.g., Success by 6 via the UnitedWay and Pennsylvania's Promise for Children); other government agencies (e.g., PA's Office of Child Development and Early Learning); school districts; and social media.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

While families described the information sources available to learn about and get connected to early childhood programming, a significant portion of all survey responses and focus group discussions focused on sharing the significant barriers faced in accessing early childhood programs. Of the families surveyed, almost 50% of respondents reported that cost was the most significant challenge to accessing programming, followed by transportation (19%), hours of operation (18%), location (14%), and safety and/or quality of programs (9%). Other barriers included waiting lists, specific need for early intervention or special education support, and issues with eligibility requirements (See Figure 9).

FIGURE 9. FAMILIES REPORT OF BARRIERS IN ACCESSING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN THE COMMUNITY



Focus group discussions with families and early childhood providers allowed for additional information to be collected about the identified barriers. Details shared were as follows:

COST

Many families participating in the focus groups described the challenges with finding affordable early childhood programs in their communities. Families relayed the high costs associated with sending their children to early childhood programs, coupled with the difficulties in qualifying for financial assistance or subsidy programs. For example, one family member described her challenges with searching for early childhood programming, "I'm from New York and I have no family here. So when I'm looking for help, it's like, well you need to be getting this. Um, but I don't qualify so it's like, what's the next step for someone that doesn't qualify? Whatever class, or anything I have to do I will do it." As a result, some families discussed being put into positions where they had to make a difficult choice between working or staying home with their children. For example, one family shared, "If you

work in a job making eight dollars an hour and you're working twenty hours a week, that's a hundred and sixty dollars. That's not even including taxes off the gross. You're not even making enough money in that week to pay for the daycare." Families also discussed the link between the cost and quality of available programs. One family voiced, "I mean it's more than just cost. It is cost, but it needs to be quality. Because there can be free programs that I wouldn't send my kids to if they're not safe and quality."

Cost was also mentioned as a significant factor for families during early childhood provider focus groups. The difficulties families face in qualifying for financial assistance was also echoed with early childhood providers and its impact on children attending early childhood programs. For example, one early childhood provider shares, "Cost is a factor. For families it's their trying to figure out putting them in some type of an early education program. I think parents today are looking at the cost and how can they make it work in their household to do that. Not everybody qualifies for assistance in different places, but they still can't make it. And I think that's a big, big factor in whether a child goes in to a program or not as well." As with the family focus groups, early childhood providers mentioned the decisions families must make to either work or stay home with their children due to high costs of early childhood programs, such as "Cost remains a huge factor. You know, a lot of families decide if I send my kids to preschool or I stay home with them... it's you know, the same money going in and out. So I might as well stay home with them."

"Me and my husband, we were two hundred dollars a year over the income limit for Child Care Network. So we were paying over a thousand dollars a month with both of us working two jobs to pay for daycare.... So then we ended up pulling both of our kids out of daycare. My husband changed his schedule. So we're caught. We had this internal conflict because we know our daughter needs that social interaction, but we're scraping coins to get by. So it's like do you want to sacrifice what your child needs or what your family needs? You know we are trying to do the right thing for our child and we get no support from anywhere."

- Family Member

TRANSPORTATION

Lack of available transportation in communities was additionally mentioned as a barrier to accessing early childhood programs. For example, one family member shared, "Transportation. You got this amount of kids which they don't provide transportation... And it's up to the parents to do it. But some parents can't and if your car breaks down, or you don't even have a car. It's kind of hard getting around with your kids or getting them to where they need to go and then picking them back up." Unlike the other identified barriers (which were similarly shared among families across the focal counties), transportation seemed to be a particularly significant challenge for families in Perry County. Potentially as a result of the more rural landscape of the community, many families from Perry County shared the same sentiment that "transportation is a major issue out here."

Early childhood providers also referenced the challenges related to transportation for families, and furthermore the impact it has on children being able to attend early childhood programming. One provider shared, "There's not nearly enough quality centers to meet the needs and once again, they need transportation to get there. I have lost two kids out of my program because I could not provide transportation this year due to funding. So two kids had to leave the program, which was really sad. I had 29 on the waitlist at the time, but it's still sad. You know?"

HOURS OF OPERATION

During focus group discussions, families expressed their challenges with finding early childhood programs that met their needs as it relates to hours of operation. Some families discussed the difficulties in finding full-day arrangements for their children, such as "In my area, we have one child-care center... the Christian church, it's half day. And some people are looking for full day. This is the concern a lot of families have." At the same time, a few families shared their thoughts about the benefits of having half-day programs and that variety in operating hours is key. For example, one family shared, "Would be nice to have some 2 day, 3 day options, 4 day... just some variety. Full day... different kids like my son, he wouldn't have been able to do it. I think he would have been so exhausted even if he had to do 5 days a week for half days, but if there was an availability of options."

Hours of operation were also a common thread among early childhood provider discussions. Participants in the focus groups echoed families' desire for full-day program options. One provider shared, "Within our program, we

"The start time and end time... that doesn't always work out for families. So we miss out serving some families otherwise that would be a really good fit. So to come to us with what their needs are schedule-wise, and unfortunately that doesn't always work out. That's part of reality."

- Early Childhood Provider

families who need the before and after. But we cannot provide the before and after for K4-aged children. So then, I think it becomes a barrier for some families. And getting them the care and getting schooling for their child because it is easier to take the child to Susie down the street because then they don't have to worry about every morning and every afternoon when they have to be at work at seven and don't get off until five. Wrap around care I guess is the best term. It creates a barrier for people I think."

LOCATION

As families expressed challenges related to the location of early childhood programs, it often emerged as an issue that is compounded by lack of transportation and availability of programs in the community. For example, one family member shared, "There's no Head Start. So technically I live in Newport. I can cross Juniata and go to the Head Start there that is actually four days a week. It's only half-days, but still four days a week and she gets a lunch and a breakfast. I know people that go to this. But since I don't live in Juniata I can't go. Which I have a four-year old who's in desperate need and I have a soon-to-be three-year old who is in desperate need of a Head Start and we got nothing. We have one vehicle. So there's the next problem. If someone was in Newport or somewhere close I can walk to, I would gladly take my kids every day to help them." As with transportation, this issue seemed to be a particularly significant barrier for families living in Perry County, possibly as a result of the more rural landscape.

Early childhood providers also discussed location as being a barrier for families. In these discussions, location continued to emerge as a compounded issue that additionally impacted families' access to quality programs. Early childhood providers described the choice families often have to make of attending early childhood programs conveniently located within the community, which in some cases may not be of high quality. One provider shared, "I think it's so important to get the information in the family's hands so that they know that quality is out there. And that just because Susie Johnson is down the street, it doesn't mean that's the best quality... Susie Q, only charges twenty bucks a week, doesn't mean that's a good quality early childhood experience for the child. No matter what age."

SAFETY AND/OR QUALITY OF PROGRAMS

Although some families used the terms "safety" and "quality" interchangeably, participants in the focus groups discussed these issues at times as almost separate entities. During focus group conversations, some families seemed to prioritize safety and trust of early childhood programs as a primary issue, where other aspects related to quality (e.g., early learning support) became more of a secondary factor when choosing programming for their children. For example, one family member shared, "I don't trust my kid with any person. So to send them to a daycare and to walk in, the first thing you want to feel is safety. That's the first thing you want." And another family described the further challenges faced with prioritizing safety and trust, but the program not being of high quality as it relates to providing an educational experience for her child - "My two-and-a-half year old has horrid separation anxiety. And given the barriers that I already face, being here in Perry County daycares are very limited. The daycare that I was

have a number of different program options. Some of our class days are 3 and a half hours, some are five hours long. They typically want the 5 hour day. They want the more hours they can get in the program. So I think it's a barrier for you know some families to utilize that smaller number of service hours." Further, a few early childhood providers mentioned the challenges with providing full-day programming for families particularly in school-based settings. For example, "I think that's one of the big things we see with the K4 program and the school district is

"My home-based day care is of high quality and safe. They are just as cared for as if it were family or friends. It was not easy to find a daycare facility program, which was affordable, licensed and high quality. Took much research for many in-person facility visits. Neighbor told me about online daycare search engine. I did the research online and in person on my own. I have the skill and internet access to figure out options, but without internet would not been able to do it. Cost eliminate many options, quality eliminate others. We chose one which hours of operation were less flexible, but make it work since it safe and affordable."

- Family Member

lucky enough to find, they take good care of him, but it's more so let's just kind of do a free-for-all play all day thing. It's not structured where they have education or anything along those lines. So while he's getting around other children, he's not picking up the educational aspect of it that I want him to have. So I'm coming here taking classes to better myself. But when I get home, I'm tired of course. He's tired from just playing. But then mommy has to throw in the educational aspect of it all by herself and pray that mom covers everything that he's going to need as time goes on." When referring to aspects of quality, many families discussed their desire for more "structured" programs, as it relates to classroom management and providing early learning support. One family described, "now for my fourth and fifth I realize that the preschool that we used previously, I feel like they were more into playing and crafting, which is okay. They need to learn those social skills, and how to cut, you know, those sorts of things. But the year before kindergarten, I really wished my kids would've been a little more academically prepared. So now that my fourth and fifth are preschool-aged, I really like the teachers as people, but wasn't sure if that was the right place. Or I knew it wasn't the right place to put them academically."

Discussions with early childhood providers aligned with themes seen with families, particularly of the different priority levels when it comes to aspects of safety and quality. For example, one provider shared, "Yeah, I feel like quality is so different for so many different families. So I mean I see a lot of families who utilize our programs who for them, quality is they've built a relationship with the teacher. They feel like their child is safe and that's enough for them. They can take their child, they feel good about that and they could leave. As there are other parents who are like, I want to see the lesson plan. 'Did you post this week's lesson plan?' 'You know what are you focusing on?' And so I think it's a combination of families that we provide care for that are on many different levels. Then we have the parent who will come in on Friday at 4:45 and say, I finally got a job. They just offered me a job, but I need childcare starting Monday. And, it doesn't matter. Nothing matters to them other than they will have a place to drop their child off on Monday at 7:00. You know they're not even considering quality or who's going to be caring for their child. So I mean we provide for a huge range. I think one of the most important thing for the provider is just to understand those families, understand what their needs and expectations are, and making them feel comfortable based on that." And another provider added, "I would agree safety would probably be the first thing, followed by curriculum, like what are you teaching my child, are you just baby-sitting my child, you know that sort of thing." As previously mentioned, early childhood providers also discussed the compounded factors with families accessing quality programs, and finding cost, location, and transportation often as barriers – "There aren't very many 3 and 4 star centers [as examples of quality programs in Keystone STARS Quality Rating and Improvement System] available to them in Harrisburg for one thing. And a lot of times they are not as accessible for our families - some of those centers don't offer the same kind of supports, like the transportation that Val mentioned to get to and from the program, and you know cost is probably a big factor with accessing programs too, so I don't know how much experience they [families] would have with them [3/4 STAR programs] directly, but it doesn't seem to be something that they're necessarily asking us about, as far as I know."

OTHER BARRIERS

Communication - Another barrier that seemed to emerge from focus group discussions was related to lack of effective communication regarding available programs in the communities. As previously mentioned, families rely heavily on personal networks and "word of mouth" to learn about available early childhood programs, and the feeling that this was "not enough." As a result, families discussed further challenges with navigating the early childhood system and accessing related programs, such as due to missing registration deadlines on multiple occasions and particularly with accessing early intervention and special education services. For example, one family member shared, "They're in early intervention. But early intervention stops at three. What happens after that? If I can't find anything, what happens?" Early childhood providers also echoed this concern - "So I think trying to get that information out to families so that they know that there are options. That there is the Pre-K Counts and there's free pre-K options there's so many possibilities, but if they don't know about them they're not going to get to them. So I think there's a big disconnect there. Knowing what's out there."

"I would like to say probably more outreach. I think that there's not enough, I mean I can only tell so many people, you know what I mean? I mean, I had nobody that knew about Hamilton school. She didn't know about Hamilton school. You know, there's so many resources in this town, but people don't know."

- Family Member

Limited Availability & Waiting Lists – As an overarching challenge, limited availability and waiting lists with early childhood programs seemed to be a compounding factor contributing to many of the previously discussed barriers. Many families in the focus groups mentioned the lack of capacity to serve the families that were searching for early childhood programs in their communities and having been put on waitlists. As a result, families discussed having to stay home with their children or needing to find alternative arrangements with families, friends, and/or neighbors. For example, one family member shared, “Last year, we did a pre-school co-op, I used to be a teacher and I have some other friends who were in the teaching field and we just kind of got together and we would take our kids to one person’s house, drop them off, and then that person would teach the day. So that just kind of worked well for us.” In addition to preschool programming, a few families additionally discussed the limited availability of infant and toddler spaces – “Another barrier that we face with daycares is that a lot of daycares in this area don’t keep an infant room. So if you have an infant child under the age of two, I had that in the past before he turned two, I couldn’t find daycare. Because they don’t have an infant room.” Discussions with early childhood providers mirrored those of the families regarding the lack of availability. For example, one provider shared, “I have a lot of frustration coming from families because there’s not room. In northern Dauphin County, we have one Keystone STAR center in one region, three school districts, another Keystone STAR center and then two Pre-K Counts classrooms in the whole region. 31,000 residents. So I’ve got 15 slots, I’ve got a waiting list of 25. They call and say, ‘Do you have room?’ Well, your number is 18 on the waiting list, that’s frustrating to hear. So then I refer them to Head Start and give them the information, but Head Start is two days a week for three hours a day. So just frustration because there’s not nearly enough centers, quality centers to meet the needs.”

FAMILY EXPERIENCES WITH EXISTING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Of the families that have been able to access early childhood programs that meet their needs, a few common themes emerged from focus group discussions. Many families discussed program characteristics that related to overcoming existing barriers, such as affordability, safety, and quality. For example, “It’s a faith-based, really strong Christian program. We just really liked that about it as well. They have their parent meeting at the beginning of the year, and they really stressed the safety. They have alarms on the doors and things, and you’re able to go and meet the teachers and it feels safe and quality and my son has loved it. Every year he’s loved it.” Families emphasized the benefits being exposed to engaging environments that support multiple aspects of children’s

“They’re also part of the Keystone STARS. Amazing teachers. All very, very, very sweet. They loved the kids. The playground is enclosed. At times, they get the whole school together and they’ll do things together... So yeah it’s very amazing. She’s learned a lot. That’s also one of the best things. When she comes home and she starts saying, ‘Ocho... nueve... diez’ at three years old. What else is she spells her name. She’s amazing. And that’s one of the best parts knowing that your child’s going to school. And not just going and watching TV. Or not just taking naps anytime of the day. Everything is structured there. Everything is great. I love when she comes home and just starts telling me things about her little friends and starts spelling her friends’ names. I love it.”

- Family Member

learning and development. Furthermore, families described the role of early childhood programs in preparing their children for school. For example, one family shared, “I prefer my daughter to be with a center/school-based program, which has structured curriculum to prepare her transition to the school year ahead.” Another family added, “I can’t stress enough. The program is so awesome because they prepared my babies for the grades to come.” Moreover, families shared about the potential differences seen in children’s level of skill development when exposed to early learning programming - “If a child’s in daycare or preschool before kindergarten, they will learn more, they will be on the same level. But if they’re not in daycare or preschool before kindergarten, they’re going to be totally lost.”

OUTREACH & PARTNERSHIPS WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

In general, barriers seem to exist within communities related to outreach and for building partnerships between families and early childhood programs. Although traditional methods have not been found to be as successful, families and early childhood providers have identified strategies to overcome some of these challenges and to strengthen connections.

BARRIERS TO OUTREACH & PARTNERSHIPS

During focus group discussions, families shared their thoughts about barriers that exist with connecting to and building strong partnerships with early childhood programs. In these conversations, families expressed the importance of early childhood providers “understanding what’s actually in our community – what our community is actually facing.” Families emphasized the desire for early childhood programs to learn about the unique characteristics, strengths and challenges both children and families experience on a daily basis. Without this understanding, families shared it contributing to difficulties with building relationships and trust between families and programs, but also with being able to effectively educate their children. For example, one family shared, “We’re actually bringing a lot of outside teachers that really don’t really have the knowledge or the understanding of what’s actually in our community. What our community is actually facing. So they’re coming in and they’re teaching the kids that they really don’t relate to, they don’t really understand. And they’re putting them in behavioral support classes. When a lot of times they just basically just don’t understand that child. And it’s not that they have a learning disability or anything like that. It’s just a fact that they don’t understand our children.” Another family member added, “I work in a school. A lot of my colleagues are from Lancaster or Middletown. You have not been in these children’s homes. You don’t know the daily struggles they have. Their least concern is their shirt being tucked in. Some of these kids might have slept on a concrete floor that night. You know they come to school hungry, but they don’t know how to say, ‘I’m hungry.’ You know they’re acting out because they haven’t eaten a hot meal in three days. And a lot of these teachers they have that disconnect.”

Similarly, early childhood providers discussed the importance of relationship building in connecting to and providing services for young children and families in their community. During focus group discussions, participants shared their unsuccessful experiences with using more traditional forms of outreach with families, such as attending community/health fairs, sharing flyers and brochures, and gift cards as incentives for family participation. For example, one provider described

their experience with attending fairs, “For early intervention, we used to do a lot of setting up at different fairs and had booths at family festivals and things like that. I think we got a lot of people coming by and taking information and doing the activities, but at least for Cumberland and Perry we never really saw an increase in referrals from that. I think it was kind of an awareness activity, which I think was beneficial in that way, but it never really translated into increased referrals for us.” Mirroring the comments by families, early childhood providers discussed the significant importance of cultivating relationships with families that are built on trust. For example, another provider shared, “You can’t quickly build trust, but I think that’s something else that’s missing... You have to have had a relationship with people long enough that they trust that what you are asking for is in good faith to help them. We’re asking this because we want to be able to help provide these services to you... I think that’s a key component.” At the same time, early childhood providers also echoed the families’ sentiments about the need to understand the dynamics of each community and how that impacts connecting with and meeting the needs of families - “I think it’s important. Many of our parents have not necessarily had very good backgrounds in schools. Schools weren’t necessarily a real safe place for them when they went. So it’s key that when they enter the building, it’s welcoming and the teachers are able to communicate with them in a fashion that is not condescending in any way, but very supportive. So I think that’s a big, that can be a big thing for our parents, to make sure they feel part of it and welcomed.” Although, additional barriers (e.g., lack of availability in programs) added to the challenge of effectively reaching out to and supporting children and families. For example, one provider shared, “I think it’s difficult because we run into a lot of situations where we don’t really reach out because we’re full. Our Pre-K Counts classroom fills up at the snap of a finger. So, it’s like we’re not even reaching out to folks who don’t have access because we’re not able to provide that bridge for them. We’re not able to provide that care because our program is full. So, I mean there’ll be times when we go out to various community events and will be like, ‘I want to give you a lot of information about preschool, but I’m packed like the whole year. Like I can’t even take another child.’ And so we talk to families and they get excited about the things that we have to offer, which is great. But if we can’t then say, ‘come, we’ll give you a tour.’ If we can’t do that, then why get them all upset. And we have to

“I think the supports are very limited. More time, more money, more staff, all those things would allow us to reach out more and try and connect with some of those families who aren’t a part of anything. We try to do a few various events and programs and things, but certainly there’s a lot of time and investment into reaching out to those families that aren’t yet connected and um, you know, if we could have just a couple more hours in each day.”

- Early Childhood Provider

say, ‘sorry, we don’t have any room this year, try next year.’ It can be disheartening.” Furthermore, early childhood providers voiced the limited resources available (e.g., funding, staff, etc.) to support outreach and family engagement efforts.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES FOR OUTREACH & PARTNERSHIPS

During focus group discussions, both families and early childhood providers shared strategies to support strengthening outreach and partnerships, and are as follows:

"I took a parenting class a couple months ago. And when I say it was one of the best experiences that I have ever had in my life. I sat there and I'm like, 'wow, this is pretty awesome.' And then I went into the classroom and my daughter's teacher was doing the same exact thing that they were teaching us in this parenting class. I think if you do parenting classes where not only it's showing you pretty much how to cope, but also how to help your child cope with different things... It helps both ways because you have a teacher doing it and you have the parent doing it."

- Family Member

FAMILY EDUCATION & SUPPORTS

A common thread throughout family focus group discussions was sharing personal experiences with and benefits of family education and supports. Families described attending “parenting classes” or discussed their desire to be connected to such a resource. As previously shared, families had voiced their concerns about wanting to best support their children’s development and school readiness, coupled with their uncertainty about the best approaches to do so. Families seemed to offer this as a solution to helping bridge this gap. For example, one family member described their experience with parent education, “It helps the parent. It empowers them, makes them feel less helpless, you know. Because sometimes you just feel helpless when you don’t understand what they [children] need. And it just gets frustrating. But then when you start doing it and you see some positive results coming from it, it makes you want to do more.” Another family added their perspective on feeling “pressure” to prepare her

children for school and searching for resources as a support - “I’ve had kids going into school through the school system. I know now from my fourth and fifth what’s expected in Kindergarten. And I feel this huge pressure to prepare them, but I’m not a teacher... I just want to be mom at the end of the day. And there’s so much pressure to academically prepare your kids... I don’t have time for this. So what might be beneficial is a toolkit, you know? Your preschooler’s struggling with cutting, so I’m going to have a Zip Lock baggie or a pencil box, and I’m going to do homework, you know? I don’t have to think about it. I don’t have to try and figure out from a teacher standpoint what they need. It’s a little five-minute homework that I can do with my child. And we can put the paper back in the box and take it to school and show it’s practicing homework for Kindergarten. I don’t have time, the resources, or the knowledge to do these things in preparation. I just want to be mom. So if the preschool or the school system can do these... Just little toolkits, just to help parents prep.” Families also discussed these resources being an avenue to strengthen skills as advocates for their children – “The parents’ voices are so vital for their child’s education. Just one voice can actually sound the alarm for a whole new program. And a whole new re-vamping of the entire system. I just think there needs to be something. Something to empower parents to know their laws, their rights.” Families additionally shared their desire for support and/or play groups as an outlet where both families and children can gather and interact in an informal setting – “Having a nice place where parents can go. Even if it’s only like once a month. Parents can go and their children can go. So my daughter gets that interaction that I’m so desperately trying to get her. You know, but it’s in a safe environment.”

Similar thoughts were shared by early childhood providers regarding parent education opportunities. Head Start was often lifted as an example of best practice in providing “parent trainings” and resources, as well as creating space to actively partner with families to support their children’s education. For example, one provider shared, “We do and I know Head Start does this too, we do parent trainings...parent gatherings we call it. And try to give them information on where their children should be developmentally at a particular age, whether it’s social, cognitive, physical, and then provide them with some materials that help to reinforce what it is we’re doing in the classroom at home and to give them some tips so that they can feel better, you know to be more part of their child’s education.” And another provider added, “Parent education. Some of those kinds of meetings and gatherings, as well as some of the home visits that Head Start does. Parents and teachers together look at the child’s current levels of development, where are they, what they can do, what are their strengths, what do they like

to do, and they set specific goals for them in all the learning domains, not just social-emotional, and that are individualized... they kind of set a map for that child.”

COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES

As mentioned in the previous section, families heavily rely on personal networks and “word of mouth” to often learn about and connect with early childhood programs. Families shared their concerns related to the lack of communication as a barrier to accessing early childhood programming and their sentiments that this approach was “not enough.” In focus group discussions with early childhood providers, participants shared these concerns and strategies to strengthen communication with families. For one, providers described their experiences with centralizing resources for families, such as with creating a space where “our center has 14 agencies under one roof and then our lobby has at least 300 resources alone.” Another provider also described making use of state efforts to centralize resources for families, such as the CCIS searchable database of early childhood providers across the state. Another strategy shared was the use of “family liaisons”, particularly to reach families not being actively engaged as part of the early childhood system. One provider shared, “I’ve seen a lot of programs, I support 50 grantees across the state, and actually some here that are local, use the families as a support. So if you can identify, some people call them family liaisons or family partners or family leaders, but if you can identify some folks in your program that can help support other families that’s a successful strategy to reach some of your hard to reach, hard to serve population.” Additionally, early childhood providers discussed the potential benefits of a wider communications or marketing initiative to effectively convey the impact of quality early childhood education with families and other key stakeholders. For example, “There could be a lot more statewide support in marketing. I mean not necessarily just Keystone STARS. But about the need for a quality early childhood education for their children. So parents know what’s available. Then they know that is important. And give them the resources to do it. I mean we do a lot of community outreach... but if it came from the state level. Like I know when Keystone STARS was first around in the early 2000s, there was commercials on TV and they were talking about it. I remember seeing the commercial and I’m like, ‘hey I’m a pilot program for that. Like, we did that.’ That kind of stuff, because that’s what parents are watching, they’re seeing that, you know? Using social media, those kinds of things. So we do some of that within our program, but again parents don’t see them unless they subscribe to our page or our Twitter feed. I definitely think that all comes with the financial and the how do you get the message out and do things if you don’t have the money to do them.”

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROVIDERS

A common thread throughout focus group conversations with families was related to the importance of trust and the need for early childhood providers to understand unique characteristics of each community as a foundation for building strong partnerships. In order to overcome this existing barrier, families proposed increased professional learning opportunities for early childhood providers that focused specifically on developing family-program partnerships. For example, one family member shared, “Because it’s just so much that’s going on in our communities and I feel like our voices are not being heard and they need to be. I feel that there should be more training with these teachers, instructors, or what have you. Because I notice, like a lot of parents have stated in here, you have a lot of these teachers and instructors that just don’t have that understanding. And I feel that is key in order to be on the same page with the parent in order to help the child. Like just being on that same page you know, as adults, for the sake of the children.” And another family member added, “And I feel like they need to be taught how to teach our kids. They need to be introduced in some manner, not just inside the walls of the classroom. Just as far as how to speak to our kids. How to teach our kids. Speak with the parents. I think that engagement needs to be taught. Because it’s a lot that’s being put on our kids that I’m seeing, and it’s not our kids’ fault. We’re the adults. We need to be there as the parents. We need to be there as the teachers. And not just in that classroom. They need to see you in the community. So if we see the teachers and the people that’s actually teaching our children out inside the community, and having to interact in some way. I don’t know how to actually get that going, but I think that needs to be taught to some of the teachers because they really are having a hard time.”

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Connecting with stakeholders in the wider community in support of early childhood education was another common theme among focus group discussions. Families discussed the potential benefits of involving local

"If I had a magic wand I would like to see a broader, that's entire communities right, recognize the value of pre-natal through 3rd grade... that more communities as a whole, so not just these pockets where we're very siloed. The individual organizations and groups are focused on their particular piece of it, but there's not as much as that interweaving. Again, we all impact doctors, police officers, you know literacy council so that we're all more connected and helping children work towards that goal of becoming more ready for school."

- Early Childhood Provider

ongoing work, "We started a program called 'Parent Café' and that's a consortium of agencies here in town. The focus is to try to get more parents connected with each other and with social supports. And that's open to everyone. We've had limited time out so far, but we do have a group that been running pretty strong... since we started it and we're still working to expand that program."

businesses in the effort - "We have opportunities to not only enhance the community through childcare, but we can also get businesses involved." Comments by early childhood providers mirrored and expanded upon this sentiment. Early childhood providers discussed the benefits of connecting with key stakeholders within the larger community, such as with health care agencies and pediatricians, libraries, police officers, businesses, and policymakers. Specific strategies shared included "community conversations about early childhood education" and development of early childhood focused partnerships or initiatives between community organizations. For example, one provider described their

RECOMMENDATIONS

Informed by findings from the needs assessment of the focal counties, the following recommendations were developed to support TFEC's strategic grant-making program as a targeted initiative to improve access to quality early learning opportunities for all young children in South Central Pennsylvania. To that end, the recommendations expand upon proposed strategies from stakeholders in the community and center upon three key areas: **1) strategies for families; 2) strategies for early learning providers; and 3) strategies for the community.** Moreover, the recommendations offered focus on building upon existing efforts and strengthening the capacity of local organizations - rather than proposing direct service strategies - in order to create more robust, sustainable change. Overall, the recommendations are intended to serve as a guidance document to be reviewed by TFEC leadership and used as the foundation for data-driven decision-making with regard to guiding future funding efforts.

STRATEGIES FOR FAMILIES

The recommendations related to this key area are focused specifically on supporting families' role as a key partner in the education of their young children.

EXPANDING FAMILY EDUCATION & SUPPORTS

Funding organizations delivering evidence-based parent education programming may be one approach to boost opportunities for families to learn about additional strategies that will foster their children's learning and development. During focus groups, both family and early childhood providers described the benefits of such resources. Recent research suggests that incorporating a parenting-focused component to complement preschool can lead to added gains in children's cognitive skills and improved school readiness for children. Such programs have also been shown to promote parent engagement, reduce parental stress, foster positive parent-child relationships, and deepen overall parenting satisfaction.⁵ Parenting education programs that include modeling of positive interactions or opportunities for practice with feedback have been found to have the largest impact, while workshops and classes where parents only receive information about parenting strategies or practices have been found to be less effective.⁶ In general, various evidence-based programs currently exist and are being used in the early childhood field, such as Strengthening Families and Opening Doors. Based on focus group responses, this work appears to be already occurring in many of the focal communities where additional support from TFEC may be able to advance such efforts.

AT A GLANCE: PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework ("Strengthening Families") is a research-based approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Strengthening Families is built upon on engaging families, programs and communities in building five protective factors: 1) parental resilience; 2) social connections; 3) knowledge of parenting and child development; 4) concrete support in times of need; and 5) social and emotional competence in children. Across the country, Strengthening Families is being used to reshape how early care and education programs engage parents in their children's development and to help them build strong relationships between family members and staff.

Resource: <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies>

Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors is the nation's first evidence-based comprehensive training program developed by and for Latino parents with children ages 0-5. Parent input informs the Abriendo Puertas / Opening Doors curriculum, which uses the "popular education" approach to engage parents in lessons that reflect the culture of the target audience. The ten interactive sessions draw from real-life experiences, incorporate data about local schools and communities, and focus on helping Latino parents understand their important role in the development of and long-term impact on their children's educational outcomes.

Resource: <http://ap-od.org>

Another approach may be to support the expansion of free online or application-based programs in the focal communities. During focus group discussions, families voiced the importance of experiential learning and making use of everyday experiences and routines to support children's skill development. More recently, advances in technology have been used to promote methods for regularly sharing activities families can incorporate into their daily lives to support their children's learning. Clear benefits of such efforts are that families have increased access to such information via internet and/or through use of mobile devices - removing barriers that may exist with more place-based models. For example, Early Learning GPS is available for families through Pennsylvania's Promise for Children and Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning. This resource can be accessed free online and via mobile device apps. Families are able to create a personal map for each child in order to:

- Save favorite tips and resources;
- Follow their children's developmental milestones;
- Search and save family activities based on Pennsylvania's Early Learning Standards;
- Compare child care and other early learning programs; and
- Search and save information about local organizations that can provide additional support.

While the Early Learning GPS can be used individually by families, it can additionally be used in collaboration with early childhood providers also working to support their children's development. To that end, the program can be used one-on-one during family-teacher conferences, in parent trainings, and other group settings. Other similar examples that may be of interest include Vroom and ReadyRosie.

AT A GLANCE: PARENT EDUCATION ONLINE SUPPORT & APPS

Vroom was born out of a need for creative tools and materials that inspire families to turn everyday moments into brain building moments. It was developed with thoughtful input from parents, early childhood experts, neuroscientists, parents and community leaders. To support this effort, the Bezos Family Foundation provided funding to advance the goal of finding new ways of sharing the science of early brain development so that all children have the chance to become thriving adults. Vroom is all about meeting families in the places they live, work, and play. As such, they partner with trusted community organizations and leaders by sharing Vroom Materials with them to give communities real ownership in the movement to create an early learning nation. Vroom is rolling out across the nation in partnership with cities, communities, states, and national nonprofits.

Resource: <http://www.joinvroom.org>

ReadyRosie is an early education tool that is currently helping schools and communities across the nation deepen and scale their parent engagement efforts by leveraging the power of video modeling and mobile technology to meet and equip parents where they are. With ReadyRosie, parents and caregivers receive daily texts, emails, or app notifications in English and Spanish. ReadyRosie also has hundreds of brief videos in English and Spanish that model everyday interactions in familiar environments with real parents. Further, schools and communities can monitor the data to measure the impact on home/school connections, parent engagement, and student achievement.

Resource: <https://readyrosie.com>

STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES

TFEC could consider furthering efforts by the focal communities, or even larger statewide approaches to centralize resources and improve communication with families. Throughout focus group discussions, communication was mentioned by various participants as a barrier to accessing early childhood programming. Families voiced the tendency to heavily rely on personal networks for information, while early childhood providers shared their concerns and the benefits to strengthening communication with families. As mentioned in focus groups, there are various agencies and initiatives that currently exist to bridge this gap and connect families with early childhood related resources. Without a need to "recreate the wheel", future TFEC grant-making could be focused on supporting existing efforts to assist families in connecting with available resources and navigating the existing early childhood system in the focal communities. Moreover as "word of mouth" was identified as the primary source of communication for families, the use of family liaisons may be a key component to the success of

such efforts. As mentioned above, Pennsylvania's Promise for Children is a state-wide campaign developed to raise awareness of the importance of early learning and to connect families to local resources, such as child care/early learning programs; family support resources; financial assistance and human services; family Centers; GED programs; libraries; and local school districts. This campaign is a collective initiative being sponsored by the PA Build Initiative, Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality, The Grable Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, and William Penn Foundation, in partnership with the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning. PA's "Promise Ambassadors" - comprised of families, early childhood professionals, and local community leaders - play a central role in their outreach strategy to connect families and other stakeholders in the community to resources and to this effort as a whole. Ambassadors receive training, presentation materials and handouts, along with other supports to "help spread the word that quality early learning matters and help families make solid early learning choices." Another example of initiatives that incorporate family liaisons include Raising a Reader Massachusetts, where families are trained and supported as part of the larger program model. This approach is similar to TFEC's Parents & Partners initiative where Parent Liaisons connected with families by sharing activities that could be done at home to prepare children for Kindergarten. **Additionally, TFEC could explore supporting opportunities that create space for families to advocate for their children.** In focus group discussions, families discussed their desire to tap into resources to strengthen their skills as advocates for their children. Great Start Parent Coalitions offer a current example in the field where families come together to collaborate as part of an advocacy body.

AT A GLANCE: FAMILY LIAISONS

Raising a Reader fosters a reading routine whereby children carry bright red bags filled with high-quality picture books into their homes each week. The Raising a Reader mission is to foster healthy brain development, parent-child bonding, and early literacy skills critical for school success by engaging parents in a routine of daily "book cuddling" with their children from birth through age 5. Independent evaluations have shown the program to increase the amount of time parents spend reading with their children, the number of visits parents and children take to the library, and an increase in kindergarten readiness skills of book knowledge, story comprehension, and print knowledge.⁷ "Parent Ambassadors" are a key component of the model used in Raising a Reader Massachusetts. In 2010, with funding support from BNY Mellon, the program introduced a parent leadership component in response to program graduates who wanted to help bring Raising A Reader MA to their neighbors. These parent leaders, called "Parent Ambassadors," are trained and supported in conducting parent outreach and facilitating Dialogic Reading workshops. 2012 program data shows that parents who attend a workshop run by a Parent Ambassador are 82% more likely to return for a second workshop, compared to only 27% who return after attending a workshop run by a member of the professional staff.⁸

Resource: <http://www.raisingareader.org>

Great Start Parent Coalitions is a group of parents and caregivers dedicated to informing, shaping, and supporting the early childhood work in their community. Across the state of Michigan, families serve as leaders, advocates, and advisers in over 50 local coalitions. Families work together to assess how well existing early childhood programs are working and give feedback about what services might be improved in the future. Each coalition provides training in leadership and advocacy skills to build public support for early childhood investment and a stronger voice for the children in the community.⁹

Resource: <http://www.greatstartforkids.org/content/great-start-parent-coalition-overview>

Future support through TFEC could also be targeted to supporting a public awareness campaign, such as previously described through Pennsylvania's Promise for Children. Similar initiatives have been used throughout the early learning field to foster communication and drive support for early childhood education with families, business leaders, policymakers, and other leaders in communities across the nation. Participants in the early childhood provider focus groups discussed the potential benefits of a wider communications initiative to effectively convey the impact of quality early childhood education with families and other key stakeholders. One of the more recent and prominent examples of this type of work is the "Invest In US" campaign unveiled by President Obama in 2014. This national campaign is an ongoing challenge to families, early childhood providers, business leaders, philanthropists, advocates, elected officials and other key stakeholder to build a better nation by expanding high-quality early childhood education programs for children from birth through age five.¹⁰ Another example is the "Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing" campaign, a joint initiative of The Opportunity Institute and

the Clinton Foundation. This effort is a “public awareness and action campaign that helps parents recognize their power to boost their children’s early brain and vocabulary development through simple, everyday actions - like describing things while walking outside, or singing songs together during bath time. Using books, parent videos, text messaging, social media, and information from expert partners, Talking is Teaching empowers parents and caregivers with fun and easy ways to improve their babies’ learning.”¹¹ Though this campaign, Talking is Teaching Communities were also created to support local campaigns by sharing lessons learned, information on place-based strategies, creative assets, training materials, and tips for parents.¹² Although not as recent, other related examples, such as Voices for Illinois Children’s “Start Early: Learning Begins at Birth” Campaign and the Hartford School Readiness Program Public Service Campaign, have been profiled in case studies to provide additional information about the underlying processes necessary to create such campaigns on a state and local level.

AT A GLANCE: PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

Voices for Illinois Children implemented a statewide public awareness campaign called Start Early: Learning Begins at Birth, with the aim of increasing awareness of the crucial learning that occurs in years birth to three. The campaign used a number of “high-tech” communication features, such as paid cable and network television ads, and radio, newspaper, and billboard advertising. Equally important to the campaign, however, was the campaign’s low-tech “ground strategy.” This strategy used a corps of local spokespeople trained on the campaign’s core messages to increase the campaign’s reach and influence with audiences in communities throughout the state. The basic premise was that audiences would pay more attention to the campaign’s messages if they came from people they already knew and trusted.¹³

Resource: <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/public-communications-campaigns-and-evaluation/keeping-it-local>

Hartford School Readiness Program Public Service Campaign was developed to inform the community of the importance and availability of school readiness opportunities by creating an integrated marketing/communications strategy that would reach the various audiences (e.g., young parents, referral community agencies, community groups, etc.) in order to enroll as many 3 and 4 year-olds as possible. The campaign also focused on creating a referral alliance among civic, cultural, religious, parent, health and community groups who would be willing to share information with parents and families and be willing to share information about potential participants with school readiness programs. Additionally, funding through the campaign supported the production of specific promotion and marketing materials, such as brochures, advertising, etc., that promotes the programs and encourages families enrolling their children in school readiness programs, offer marketing services and technical assistance to other city school readiness programs that need to increase enrollment in their programs. The goal of the effort was to create a sustainable communication and public relations plan to encourage ongoing and additional funding for the city’s school readiness programs.¹⁴

Resource: <http://firstexperience.com/portfolio-2/education/pre-k-school-readiness-public-awareness-campaign/>

STRATEGIES FOR EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

The recommendations related to this key area are focused specifically on supporting early childhood programs in effectively partnering with families to support children’s learning and development.

OFFERING SHARED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Data gleaned from this assessment point to the potential benefits of additional training and support for early childhood providers to improve engagement practices with families. This mirrors the national movement seen in promoting family engagement and providing increased supports to early childhood professionals. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education recently issued a joint policy statement on family engagement, from the early years to the early grades. Establishing or enhancing technical assistance on family engagement (e.g., enhancing existing professional development opportunities and coaching) in early childhood systems and programs was included as a key recommendation for implementing family engagement practices.¹⁵ This statement further reinforces the ongoing work – from the federal to local levels - targeted at boosting family engagement practices and ensuring early childhood educators and leaders have the supports needed to effectively partner with families. To that end,

TFEC could consider expanding ongoing efforts related to shared training and/or professional learning communities focused on strengthening family-program partnerships. Additional resources from TFEC could be focused on supporting ongoing professional development efforts or driving new opportunities for early childhood programs across all service delivery entities in the focal communities (e.g., public school pre-K programs, Early/Head Start, other center-based programs, home-based programs, etc.). For example, spurred by the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant the Maryland Family Engagement Coalition was created. As a result, the Coalition was charged with and has developed the “Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework: Maryland’s Vision for Engaging Families with Young Children”, which outlines goals and strategies to support family engagement initiatives throughout the state. Because members of the Coalition understood that the framework must be paired with meaningful capacity building, technical assistance is provided to implement strategies and training for all early learning and development programs and family engagement organizations.¹⁶ With a majority of family survey respondents reporting that their children spent most of their time either at home or with a family, friend or neighbor, TFEC may want to also consider this when determining their grant-making approach. Funded by local foundations, “Babies Ready for College” provides an example of professional development opportunities specifically focused on parents and family, friend and neighbor caregivers. Additionally, family focus participants emphasized the importance of trust and the need for early childhood providers to understand unique characteristics of each community as a foundation for building strong family-program partnerships and to effectively educate their children. Moreover, while not a representative sample and no causality can be drawn from demographic data collected through the needs assessment, it may be important to note the differences seen across race/ethnicity. Although family survey and focus group participants represented a wider range of races/ethnicities, 75% of participants in early childhood provider focus groups identified as White and/or Caucasian. To cultivate an environment where all children have a quality preschool experience and all families feel valued as partners, it is key that early childhood providers also recognize the role that culture, language, and other aspects of diversity play into their interactions with children and families. **As such, professional learning opportunities specifically focused on cultural responsiveness can support the development of such awareness and strengthen family engagement and classroom practices.** The National Equity Project culturally proficiency trainings offered through the Marin Community Foundation’s Achievement Gap Strategic Initiative is an example of this type of work.¹⁷

AT A GLANCE: SHARED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Babies Ready for College (BRFC) came in to existence out of a need to affect a child’s academic success by involving the parent. The program helps caregivers and families ensure their child is ready for school and stays on track to graduate from high school prepared for whatever course lies ahead. BRFC’s goal is to begin planting the seed of expectation for higher education in families living in chronically under-resourced communities. The 10-topic curriculum is geared to equip parents and Family, Friend and Neighbor caregivers with the knowledge and expertise to help prepare their children academically and socially before they even enter preschool. Sessions are offered in the community and selected Denver Public Schools. Trained facilitators conduct each session, and early childhood educators provide developmentally appropriate activities for the children.

Resource: <http://www.milehighmontessori.org/our-program/babies-ready-for-college/>

The National Equity Project (NEP) culturally proficiency training offered to PreK-3 staff at all of the Marin Community Foundation’s Achievement Gap Strategic Initiative (AGSI) schools has transformed Venetia Valley’s approach to family engagement. The school held an all-staff meeting to reflect on concepts covered in the training, including the “Danger of a Single Story,” Chiamamanda Adichie’s dialogue on the power of storytelling and the danger of basing our perceptions of a culture on a single story. Through this reflection process, teachers identified the assumptions they carried about the communities they serve. According to Venetia Valley staff, the NEP training was the beginning of an on-going conversation that has helped them to “demystify” assumptions about, and improve their relationship with, their student’s families.¹⁸

Resource: <http://nationalequityproject.org>

STRATEGIES FOR THE COMMUNITY

The recommendations related to this key area are focused specifically on supporting young children and their families through strengthening connections with organizations within the larger community.

SUPPORTING COALITION BUILDING WITH COMMUNITY

Both families and early childhood providers in focus group discussions emphasized the benefits of connecting with key stakeholders and organizations within the larger community, such as with health care agencies and pediatricians, libraries, police officers, businesses, and policymakers. Whether motivated by local initiatives or policy change, many communities throughout the country are finding that collaborations with early childhood providers and other community organizations can help implement high-quality pre-K programming that meets the needs of young children and their families in a more comprehensive way. For example, a number of states require local communities to establish “collaboration councils” to receive state pre-K funding. “Typically, these groups are led or chaired by the superintendent (or designee) and consist of diverse local leaders, including elected officials (e.g., mayor, school board members), parents and community-based providers. They conduct needs assessments, create implementation plans, develop grant-making processes and administer the funds in the community.”¹⁹ In other cases, states and communities are able to leverage public and private funds to create partnerships to improve early learning systems. Championed by the North Texas Community Foundation, the Early Learning Alliance (ELA) is an example of a community collaboration of more than 50 individuals, agencies, nonprofit organizations, educational and social service entities focused on improving early learning. Family engagement is of the three priority areas of the ELA as they work to provide resources and support to ensure that “parents are empowered to be their child’s first teachers and most important advocate.” To that end, **TFEC may want to consider focusing resources on supporting either existing or developing a new collaborative in the focal communities.** A collaborative effort such as this could be utilized to build upon the strengths of the communities by coordinating available resources, as well as to develop an agenda that would address existing barriers identified throughout the needs assessment in a more systemic way, such as challenges related to communication, transportation, and safety/quality of services. The collaborative could also be utilized as a powerful collective entity to advocate for and secure additional funding to expand the capacity of early childhood programming to serve more young children and families – a clear need emphasized by both families and early childhood providers throughout all of the focal communities. Other local collaborative initiatives in Pennsylvania, such as Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness, could provide key information on effective strategies and lessons learned regarding coalition building.

AT A GLANCE: COALITION BUILDING

Early Learning Alliance (ELA) is a community collaboration of more than 50 individuals and organizations focused on early learning from ages 0-8. Together, it seeks to improve outcomes for all Fort Worth children by aligning the goals of early child care providers and K-12 systems. One of the ELA priority areas is specifically family engagement, and ensuring that parents are empowered to be their child’s first teachers and most important advocate. The ELA offers training and technical assistance for agencies and schools serving families so that providers can move from traditional to transformational family engagement.

Resource: <http://northtexascf.org/initiatives/ela/>

Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness (PEAK) initiative is funded through the Pennsylvania-Pre-K Counts, United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation and other donations/grants that focus on building partnerships with the early learning programs in the Pottstown community. The ultimate goal of the initiative is to ensure that all children in Pottstown have access to early learning opportunities that prepare them to be successful in Kindergarten. PEAK works to implement the key strategy areas of community outreach, family engagement, quality improvement, health/wellness and Kindergarten transition. With the goal of impacting all young children and families in the community, new partners were added by working with community agencies to emphasize the importance of quality early education to the local community. This unique collaboration in Pottstown forms one common vision for early childhood education in the community resulting in higher quality early learning programs, increased resources for families and improved readiness for school.

Resource: <http://www.peakonline.org>

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings from the needs assessment and resulting recommendations are intended to provide TFEC with the necessary information to make effective decisions regarding grant-making for programs that promote family engagement with a focus on Kindergarten readiness. Next steps for this work may involve a targeted examination of existing efforts related to the recommendation areas in order to ensure TFEC is leveraging the strengths of each community. Additionally, the recommendations can also serve as a guide to the creation of an evaluation framework and measurable goals for implementation of selected programming receiving future funding. As a result, information derived from this initial phase of work can be used to support TFEC in maximizing investments to ensure the greatest impact in improving outcomes for young children and their families in South Central Pennsylvania.

APPENDIX

- **Family Survey**
- **Focus Group Protocol**



The Foundation for Enhancing Communities
Early Childhood Education Strategic Initiative
Draft Family Survey for Needs Assessment
May 2016

Overview of the Family Survey

To help guide their grantmaking program, The Foundation for Enhancing Communities (TFEC) is seeking to better understand the unique issues facing underserved families not yet connected to early childhood programs and services in a five-county region of South Central Pennsylvania – Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Lebanon, and Perry Counties. As a result, TFEC is collaborating with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) and selected community partners to conduct an in-depth needs assessment that documents the challenges faced by families with young children accessing early childhood education, including cultural, economic, and geographic barriers. The needs assessment process is centered on conducting the following family survey, along with a series of targeted focus groups for both families and early childhood providers.

To support outreach and data collection efforts, the family survey includes 1) a section describing the purpose and instructions for completing the survey; and 2) a series of questions that will assist with collecting both demographic data and perceptions about access to early childhood programming and services in the focal communities.

Through this process, collected information will be used to guide future recommendations for TFEC to make effective decisions regarding grantmaking to maximize investments and ensure the greatest impact in improving outcomes for young children and their families in South Central Pennsylvania.

Participants

Through this surveying effort, we hope to collect information from families with young children (from infancy through age five) in the targeted five-county region. The intent of the survey is to collect data to help TFEC understand the barriers families face with accessing early childhood programs and services. Therefore, ideally outreach for the survey would be focused on collecting information from families that are often not fully engaged in early childhood programs and services, such as families experiencing income and racial inequalities, families who primarily speak a language other than English, families that have recently migrated to the U.S., and families of children with special needs.

Timeline

In order to analyze the survey data in a timely manner, we are hoping to receive **all completed surveys by July 15, 2016**. It would be helpful if we were able to collect 75 surveys from each community partner (with the minimum of 40 surveys) in order to be able to draw reliable conclusions. If any community partners would like to continue collecting surveys after the deadline, please feel free to do so and mail them to TFEC, attention Jen Strechay.

Questions

If you have any questions about the survey or data collection process, please feel free to contact Sherylls Valladares Kahn at (877) 447-0327 ext.717 or valladares@schoolreadinessconsulting.com

EARLY CHILDHOOD FAMILY SURVEY


By completing this survey, you are sharing important information with The Foundation for Enhancing Communities (TFEC) to help guide their support for early childhood programs.

Please take a few minutes to share your thoughts and feelings about the early childhood programs in your community.

Your participation with this survey is voluntary. All information you share will be kept confidential and will not be able to be traced back to you or your child. The information collected will only be used to help improve the programs and services available to you and your child(ren).

After you fill out the survey, please return it to [Community Partner] by [Date]. Feel free to contact [Community Partner] if you have any questions about the survey at [Phone Number] and [Email].

Thanks so much for your time!



You will see the term **early childhood programs** used in this survey, which refers to programs and services in your community that help young children (from birth to five years old) with growing and learning.

FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD INFORMATION

1. How many young children live in your household?

0-2 years: _____ 3-5 years: _____

2. What is your relationship to the young child(ren)?

- ☐ Mother
- ☐ Father
- ☐ Grandparent
- ☐ Aunt/Uncle
- ☐ Legal Guardian
- ☐ Foster Parent
- ☐ Other: Please specify _____

3. Where does your young child(ren) spend most of their time during the day?

- ☐ Public school pre-k program
- ☐ Early Head Start/Head Start
- ☐ Other center-based program (like a child care center, nursery school, etc.)
- ☐ Home-based program (a child care program in a provider's home)
- ☐ With another family member, neighbor, or friend
- ☐ At home
- ☐ Other: Please specify _____

4. What county do you and your family currently live in?

- ☐ Cumberland
- ☐ Dauphin
- ☐ Franklin
- ☐ Lebanon
- ☐ Perry
- ☐ Other: Please specify _____

5. What race/ethnicity best describes you?

- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ White or Caucasian
- ☐ Multi-racial
- ☐ Other: Please specify _____

6. What language do you usually speak to your young child(ren) at home?

- ☐ English
- ☐ French
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Japanese
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Vietnamese
- ☐ Arabic
- ☐ Other: Please specify _____

7. What is the annual income of your household?

(optional)

- ☐ \$0 to \$20,000
- ☐ \$20,001 to \$50,000
- ☐ \$50,001 to \$70,000
- ☐ \$70,001 and up

CURRENT FEELINGS ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

8. How important is it for young children to have help with learning before Kindergarten?

- ☐ Not at all important
- ☐ A little important
- ☐ Somewhat important
- ☐ Very important
- ☐ Extremely important

9. What types of early childhood programs are in your community? *Please choose all that apply.*

- ☐ Public school pre-k programs
- ☐ Early Head Start/Head Start
- ☐ Other center-based programs (like child care centers, nursery schools, etc.)
- ☐ Home-based programs (child care in a provider's home)
- ☐ Home Visiting
- ☐ Special Education/Early Intervention
- ☐ Other: Please specify

10. For each statement below, please put a check or X under the option that best describes your feelings about the early childhood programs in your community: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, or does not apply.

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Does Not Apply</i>
A. Because of the age of my young child(ren), I prefer that they stay home with family and/or friends					
B. I have been able to find an early childhood program for my young child(ren)					
C. It was easy to find an early childhood program for my young child(ren)					
D. There are people in my community who help to connect me and other families to early childhood programs					
E. It was easy to get services through the early childhood programs for my young child(ren)					
F. The early childhood programs in my community meet my family's needs					

If you answered "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to any of the statements, please tell us why in the box below.

11. Which of the following people/organizations have helped you find information about early childhood programs in your community? *Please choose all that apply.*

- ☐ Pediatrician
- ☐ Early childhood program or service provider
- ☐ Library
- ☐ Family, friend, or neighbor
- ☐ Community organization or member
- ☐ Religious or faith-based group
- ☐ Other: Please specify

12. Was there anything that made it difficult to send your young child(ren) to an early childhood program or get services for your young child(ren)? *Please choose all that apply.*

- ☐ Transportation
- ☐ Cost
- ☐ Location
- ☐ Hours of Operation
- ☐ Safety and/or Quality of Available Programs
- ☐ Other: Please specify

Please remember to return the survey to [Community Partner] by [date].

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING!



The Foundation for Enhancing Communities
Early Childhood Education Strategic Initiative
Final Focus Group Protocol
June 2016

Overview of the Focus Group Protocols

To help guide their grant-making program, The Foundation for Enhancing Communities (TFEC) is seeking to better understand the unique issues facing underserved families not yet connected to early childhood programs and services in a five-county region of South Central Pennsylvania – Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Lebanon, and Perry Counties. As a result, TFEC is collaborating with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) and selected community partners to conduct an in-depth needs assessment that documents the challenges faced by families with young children accessing early childhood education, including cultural, economic, and geographic barriers. The needs assessment process is centered on conducting a family survey, along with a series of targeted focus groups for both families and early childhood providers.

The following focus group protocol provides a brief overview of the format and various questions that will be used to guide sessions with both families and early childhood providers in the focal communities.

Through this process, collected information will be used to guide future recommendations for TFEC to make effective decisions regarding grant-making to maximize investments and ensure the greatest impact in improving outcomes for young children and their families in South Central Pennsylvania.

Participants

Through this focus groups effort, we hope to collect information from families with young children and early childhood providers in the targeted five-county region. The ideal number of participants ranges from 10-12 people for each session.

Families

The intent of the focus group is to collect data to help TFEC understand the barriers families face with accessing early childhood programs and services. Therefore, ideally outreach for the sessions would be focused on collecting information from families that are often not fully engaged in early childhood programs and services, and which may include families experiencing income and racial inequalities, families who primarily speak a language other than English, families that have recently migrated to the U.S., and families of children with special needs. It would be most helpful to have as participants either families with young children (with focus on ages 3 to 5) who are not currently accessing programs, and/or those who are accessing programs but may be experiencing barriers in finding high-quality early childhood programs. Although, if there are a few select families who have accessed high-quality early learning programming that you believe would be helpful to hear their perspective and are open to participating, they would definitely be welcome them to join, but it is not necessarily the primary focus of the assessment.

Early Childhood Providers

Focus group sessions for early childhood providers would be geared toward gathering information from professionals providing early learning services to young children (with a focus on ages 3 to 5) and their families. Participants could include **licensed providers** (e.g., center-based and family child care centers); **school district professionals** (e.g., principals, preschool teachers, and school social workers); and **human service/community providers** (e.g., home visitors, early intervention and special education providers).

Questions

If you have any questions about the focus group protocols or data collection process, please feel free to contact Sherylls Valladares Kahn at (877) 447-0327 ext.717 or valladares@schoolreadinessconsulting.com

INTRODUCTION FOR FOCUS GROUPS

The first few moments of the focus group discussion are extremely important. It is during this time, the facilitator is tasked with creating a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere; providing ground rules; and setting the tone for the discussion. Much of the success of the focus group can be attributed to the development of this open environment.

SRC will use the following introduction:

- Welcome by Community Partner
- SRC Facilitator Intro & Overview of the Topic for Discussion
 - “Thank you for being here today. We so appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedules to meet with us to talk about the early childhood programs in your community. As family members/early childhood providers, you already know that learning starts from the moment babies are born - from seeing children take their first steps, learning new words, or exploring the world around them. These experiences that children have during the first few years of life can impact how well they do in school and even later in life. Also understanding this importance, the Foundation for Enhancing Communities (or TFEC) is working to support early childhood programs in your community to help prepare children for success in Kindergarten and beyond. To do this, they have recently partnered with SRC and [insert community partner] to hear from you to make sure any support they offer reflects the values and needs of the community – which is why we are here today. We would like to hear your experiences and ideas on what could potentially be done to improve education for young children – particularly for children 3 to age 5 – in your community. We are recording the meeting to make sure we capture all of your thoughts, but it will not be linked to any information that could be used to identify that it came from you.”
- Review & Sign Consent Form
- Ground Rules
 - Honor confidentiality (i.e., what is said here, stays here)
 - There are no wrong answers
 - Respect differences of opinion
 - You don’t have to answer any question you don’t feel comfortable answering

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES

OPENING

Please introduce yourself by telling us your first name, how many children you have and how old they are.

QUESTIONS

1. **What do you think children need to know or be able to do before starting Kindergarten?**
2. **What are some things you do with your children that you think might be helping them to learn and grow?**
 - a. PROBE: What do you think young children need to know to prepare for Kindergarten?
 - b. PROBE: What do you think are the most important things to do to help your child get ready for Kindergarten?
3. **What early childhood programs do you know of in your community that help young children learn and grow?** (*Share examples if needed: Early/Head Start, public school pre-k programs, child care centers, nursery schools, home visiting, early intervention, etc.*)
 - a. PROBE: What early childhood programs do you know of in your community that support families in helping their children learn and grow? (*Share examples if needed: Parent education classes and workshops*)
4. **How do parents learn about early childhood programs in this community?**
 - a. PROBE: What do you know about these programs?
5. **If your family is currently participating in an early childhood program, can you share why you chose that program?**
6. **If you chose not to have your child participate in early childhood programs or services, why was that? How did you make that decision?**
 - a. PROBE: Where do your children currently spend most of their time during the day?
7. **If you are participating in early childhood programs or services, what were your experiences when you first enrolled or tried to get services through the early childhood program?**
 - a. PROBE: Was there anything that made it difficult to learn about services, or get the support you were looking for?
 - b. PROBE: Is there anything that would have made it easier?
8. **After your family began getting services through the early childhood program, is there anything that made it difficult to keep attending?**
 - a. PROBE: Is there anything that has or would make it easier?
9. **What has been your child or family gained from participating in these early childhood programs or services?**
 - a. PROBE: Is there anything that has not worked so well?
10. **Closing question: If you could wave a magic wand to change one thing in your community that would help to make sure all children are ready for Kindergarten, what would it be?**

CLOSING

The facilitator from SRC will be sure to:

- Thank participants for attending
- Invite participants to complete exit survey

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROVIDERS

OPENING

Please introduce yourself by telling us your first name and how have you been involved in the early learning community.

QUESTIONS

1. What other early childhood programs and services do you know of in the community that might not be represented here today?
2. What do you think children need to know or be able to do before starting Kindergarten?
3. How do you think most families in the community learn about early childhood programs?
 - a. PROBE: What do you think they know about these programs?
4. What kinds of support do you think families in your community are interested in receiving from early childhood programs?
5. What do you think are the biggest priorities for families when choosing early childhood programs?
6. Of the services/supports that your organization provides, which are connected to preparing children for Kindergarten?
7. What is your experience with reaching out to families without access to early childhood programs?
(Share examples if needed: culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse families)
 - a. PROBE: What strategies do you think are the most effective in reaching families who are not currently attending early childhood programs?
 - b. PROBE: What supports are in place to help you meet the unique/diverse needs of families who are not currently attending early childhood programs? What else might be needed?
 - c. PROBE: Are there any strategies that have not worked so well?
8. Closing question: If you could wave a magic wand to change one thing in your community that would help to make sure all children are ready for Kindergarten, what would it be?

CLOSING

The facilitator from SRC will be sure to:

- Thank participants for attending
- Invite participants to complete exit survey

**THE FOUNDATION FOR ENHANCING COMMUNITIES
&
SCHOOL READINESS CONSULTING**

Consent to Participate in the Focus Group

The purpose of the group discussion and the nature of the questions have been explained to me.

I consent to take part in a focus group about my experiences, including some ways to improve the services and resources available to young children and families in my community.

My participation is voluntary. I understand that I am free to leave the group at any time.

If I decide not to participate at any time during the discussion, my decision will in no way affect the services that I receive.

None of my experiences or thoughts will be shared with anyone outside of The Foundation for Enhancing Communities and School Readiness Consulting unless all identifying information is removed first. The information that I provide during the focus group will be grouped with answers from other people so that I cannot be identified.

Please Print Your Name

Date

Please Sign Your Name

Witness Signature

Date

**THE FOUNDATION FOR ENHANCING COMMUNITIES
&
SCHOOL READINESS CONSULTING**

Family Exit Survey

Thank you for participating in today's focus group!

The below survey will allow us to gather a little more information about you and your children.
Please let us know if you have any questions. Thanks again!

1. How many young children live in your household?

0-2 years: _____ 3-5 years: _____

2. What is your relationship to the young child(ren)?

- ☐ Mother
- ☐ Father
- ☐ Grandparent
- ☐ Aunt/Uncle
- ☐ Legal Guardian
- ☐ Foster Parent
- ☐ Other: Please specify

3. Where does your young child(ren) spend most of their time during the day?

- ☐ Public school pre-k program
- ☐ Early Head Start/Head Start
- ☐ Other center-based program (like a child care center, nursery school, etc.)
- ☐ Home-based program (a child care program in a provider's home)
- ☐ With another family member, neighbor, or friend
- ☐ At home
- ☐ Other: Please specify

4. What county do you and your family currently live in?

- ☐ Cumberland
- ☐ Dauphin
- ☐ Franklin
- ☐ Lebanon
- ☐ Perry
- ☐ Other: Please specify

5. What race/ethnicity best describes you?

- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ White or Caucasian
- ☐ Multi-racial
- ☐ Other: Please specify

6. What language do you usually speak to your young child(ren) at home?

- ☐ English
- ☐ French
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Japanese
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Vietnamese
- ☐ Arabic
- ☐ Other: Please specify

7. What is the annual income of your household?

(optional)

- ☐ \$0 to \$20,000
- ☐ \$20,001 to \$50,000
- ☐ \$50,001 to \$70,000
- ☐ \$70,001 and up

**THE FOUNDATION FOR ENHANCING COMMUNITIES
&
SCHOOL READINESS CONSULTING**

Early Childhood Provider Exit Survey

Thank you for participating in today's focus group!

The below survey will allow us to gather a little more information about you and how you support young children and families in your community. Please let us know if you have any questions. Thanks again!

1. How many years of professional experience do you have working with children younger than kindergarten age?

- ☐ Less than 5 years
- ☐ 5 to 10 years
- ☐ 11 to 20 years
- ☐ More than 20 years

2. What is the age range of children supported through your early childhood program?

- ☐ Infants (birth through 1 year old)
- ☐ Toddlers (After 1 year, but less than 3 years of age)
- ☐ Preschoolers (At least 3 years of age to 5 years old)

3. How many children of preschool-age, on average, are enrolled in your early learning program?

- ☐ Up to 10 children
- ☐ 11 to 25 children
- ☐ 26 to 50 children
- ☐ 51 or more children

4. Where is your early childhood program located?

- ☐ Cumberland
 - ☐ Dauphin
 - ☐ Franklin
 - ☐ Lebanon
 - ☐ Perry
 - ☐ Other: Please specify
-

5. What option below best describes the early childhood program you help to support?

- ☐ Public school pre-k program
 - ☐ Early Head Start/Head Start
 - ☐ Other center-based program (like a child care center, nursery school, etc.)
 - ☐ Home-based program (a child care program in a provider's home)
 - ☐ Home visiting
 - ☐ Early intervention or special education services
 - ☐ Other: Please specify
-

6. What race/ethnicity best describes you?

- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
 - ☐ Black or African American
 - ☐ Hispanic or Latino
 - ☐ White or Caucasian
 - ☐ Multi-racial
 - ☐ Other: Please specify
-

7. What languages do you speak? *Please check all that apply.*

- ☐ English
 - ☐ French
 - ☐ Spanish
 - ☐ Chinese
 - ☐ Japanese
 - ☐ Korean
 - ☐ Vietnamese
 - ☐ Arabic
 - ☐ Other: Please specify
-

8. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ High school or GED
 - ☐ Child Development Associate degree (CDA)
 - ☐ Associates degree
 - ☐ Bachelors degree
 - ☐ Masters degree
 - ☐ Doctoral degree
 - ☐ Other: Please specify
-

REFERENCES

- ¹ Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M.R., Espinosa, L.M., Gormley, W.T., Ludwig, J., Magnuson, K.A., Phillips, D., & Zaslow, M.J. (2013). Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education. Retrieved from <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Evidence%20Base%20on%20Preschool%20Education%20FINAL.pdf>
- ² Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning. (2016). *Program Reach and Risk Assessment State Fiscal Year 2013-2014*. Retrieved from <http://www.pakeys.org/uploadedContent/Docs/ELinPA/OCDEL/Reach%20and%20Risk%202013-14%20FINAL%2002262016.pdf>
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ UnitedWay. (2015). Life in the Capital Region: 2014 assessment of our community. Retrieved from <https://www.uwcr.org/top-stories/461-life-in-the-capital-region-2014-assessment-of-our-community>
- ⁵ National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, Office of Head Start. (2013). Understanding family engagement outcomes: Research to Practice Series. Positive parent-child relationships. Retrieved from (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/parent-child-relationships.pdf>)
- ⁶ Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M.R., Espinosa, L.M., Gormley, W.T., Ludwig, J., Magnuson, K.A., Phillips, D., & Zaslow, M.J. (2013). Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education. Retrieved from <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Evidence%20Base%20on%20Preschool%20Education%20FINAL.pdf>
- ⁷ Weiss, H. B., Caspe, M., & Lopez, M. E. (2006). Family involvement in early childhood education. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/family-involvement-in-early-childhood-education>
- ⁸ Raising a Reader Massachusetts. (2016). Raising a Reader (RAR-MA Inc.) Report. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/U3akVm>
- ⁹ First Steps. (2016). Great Start Parent Coalition. Retrieved from <http://www.firststepskent.org/great-start-parent-coalition>
- ¹⁰ First Five Years Fund. (2014). Invest in US. Retrieved from <https://investinus.org>
- ¹¹ Talking is Teaching. (2016). About Us. Retrieved from <http://talkingisteaching.org/about>
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Parenta, J. (2002). Public communications campaigns and evaluation: Keeping it local. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/public-communications-campaigns-and-evaluation/keeping-it-local>
- ¹⁴ Kluskiewicz, D. (2010). Marketing an early childhood program to urban families. Retrieved from <http://firstexperience.com/2010/06/14/marketing-a-early-childhood-program-to-urban-families/>
- ¹⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education (2016). Policy statement on family engagement from the early years to the early grades. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/policy-statement-on-family-engagement.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Maryland State Department of Education. (2013). Maryland's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant (ELCG). Retrieved from <https://marylandlearninglinks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ELCG-Project-Implications-for-Students-with-Disabilities-final-10-18-13.pdf>
- ¹⁷ Learning for Action. (2014). Developing Effective Family Engagement Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.marincf.org/sites/default/files/downloadable/Family%20Engagement%20Learning%20Brief.pdf>
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Wat, A. & Gayl, C. (2009). Beyond the school yard: Pre-k collaborations with community-based partners. Retrieved from <https://www.nmefoundation.org/getmedia/c9544bc4-2128-4ec5-8446-d7858f12868b/BeyondtheSchoolYard>



SCHOOL READINESS CONSULTING
www.schoolreadinessconsulting.com