

## Community School Readiness Improvement Plan:

- A. Identify community strategies for actions to improve the following system measures in the 5 priorities addressed in the Community School Readiness Assessment:
- i. Easy Access to needed services
    - o Several of the services provided for families with young children have made an effort to increase access to needed services. A couple of the service providers now are able to offer enrollment online, as well as by phone. For example, Sooner Care and DHS Childcare Subsidy Benefits Program all allow parents to enroll themselves and their children in services through their website. <sup>Page 3, 8</sup> Family Planning Clinic, Children First, New Parent Support, Comanche County memorial Hospital Birthing Classes, Southwestern Medical Center Birthing Classes, Crossroads Youth and Family Services- Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and Child Guidance, are all service providers which allow for enrollment by phone. Also, many providers are housed at the same physical location which allows for one trip to serve more than one purpose. WIC, Family Planning Clinic, Sooner Start, and Children First are housed at the same physical location at the Comanche County Health Department (1010 SW Sheridan Road, Lawton, OK). <sup>Page 2,3,9</sup>
    - o Transportation within the Lawton, OK area is low cost and reliable. Transportation for rural areas to Lawton, OK (where most of the services are offered in Comanche County) is gaining momentum with the addition of Lyft and UBER, yet improvement is still needed.
    - o Affordability for those families who are just above the income requirements to receive free or reduce cost services is lacking. While most services provided are free or on a sliding scale no reduce cost services exist for those families slightly above the income requirements.
    - o Increasing education to target all new parents will allow for knowledge and alternatives to services can be found would be a solution to this issue.
    - o Access to Pre-Kindergarten seems to be hindered by transportation to and from the schools. As transportation for all other grades is state mandated then it seems to be little increase in cost for the school districts to also provide transportation to Pre-K.
    - o With only 62.3% of children under the age of 3 being immunized <sup>page 19</sup> it is clear that there is a gap in emphasis of importance of immunization but also the non-traditional hours of pediatrician offices in Comanche County is also lacking. While urgent care facilities are available during non-traditional hours, primary care pediatrician offices are not.
    - o Increasing parental awareness of the availability of services from Priority 1-5 is a huge necessity. In many cases services exist but parents are unaware of them or even how to enroll in them.
  - ii. Stronger inter-agency service coordination and referral network
    - o During our research for the Community School Readiness Assessment we could not find any policy, procedure, or standard for inter-agency service coordination or referral network. From our Community School Readiness Assessment it is clear that each agency/service provider determines if he/she will refer anyone and to which program/services he/she will refer. Without a standard or frame of work for

referrals or even a standard referral list/book it is impossible to ensure that families of young children are getting all the services they need. <sup>Page 7,14,19,24,27</sup>

- iii. Aligned policies and practices across settings
  - o Some of the early childhood services in Comanche County have aligned practices. For example, all three libraries, Elgin Public, Lawton Public, and Nye, reported on in the Community School Readiness Assessment, have the same goal to increase early literacy and get children familiar with group activities. All three have the same practices of summer reading programs and story times to encourage reading of all ages. <sup>Page 10,11</sup> Also, all childcare facilities who receive Department of Human Services funding have aligned policies following the early learning guidelines for children. Children First and New Parent Support have the same practices in that they visit the family in their home and attempt to guide them through the challenges facing a new birth. Both are nurse- family support programs that offer home visit support services. <sup>Page 2</sup> Both hospitals Comanche County Memorial and Southwest Medical Center have birthing classes. Birth Choice and Pregnancy Resource Center are a duplication of services and appear to have the same practices. <sup>Page 4</sup> The policies of these programs tend to not be aligned within like programs/services.
  - o Other than those programs/services mentioned above the early childhood services in Comanche County, Oklahoma do not have aligned policies and or practices.
- iv. System is responsive to and respectful of family needs and voice
  - o Families receiving services appear to have some voice in making policy and procedures. For example, New Parent Support and Children First, nurses meet with the family when it is convenient for each individual family. <sup>Page 2</sup> Otherwise, family's needs and voice are rarely asked for by the service provider much less used to make policy change. However, it should be noted that programs/services receiving state and federal dollars are often so inundated with "red tape" that most of the staff's time and effort is spent providing the service to meet the requirements of the state/federal grantor rather than focusing on the family's needs/voice. As programs mainly obtain service feedback through complaints and federal/state quality standards little to no family voice is present. <sup>Page 5, 11, 17, 22</sup>
- v. Resources are leveraged and expanded to meet needs
  - o With severe budget cuts at both the state and federal levels expansion has not been something programs/services have been able to do in the past few years. The economic outlook for both the state and federal budget do not look promising for expansion of services in the near future. The lack of expansion will hopefully cause resources to be leveraged to meet the current needs of our community at a more efficient rate.
  - o With only 85% of Kindergarten students passed the literacy screening performed at the end of the kindergarten year leads us to know that the current system is not effective for all students. <sup>Page 19</sup> If the state of Oklahoma would realign the budget to emphasize the importance of education, teacher pay and overcrowding of classrooms, would reduce allowing for additional one-on-one time interaction between student and teacher. Also, with an emphasis on education the addition of aids and remedial training for those reading below average could increase.

- vi. Services provided are of high quality
  - o Those services receiving state and federal dollars are required to use the quality standards created by their governing bodies. Therefore, it is assumed that those receiving state and/or federal funds are of the highest quality. All other programs/services are able to determine their own quality ratings. Consequently, without us having access to each program/service quality assessment it is impossible for us to report their quality level for each service/program. <sup>Page 5, 11, 17, 22</sup>
  - o Increasing the quality of services will allow for the community needs to be met more effectively.
  - o With only 59% of licensed child care providers providing care for families who receive child care subsidies, <sup>Page 11</sup> coupled with the fact that no childcare centers take in children during non-traditional hours vastly limits a parents options for childcare if they are relying on DHS childcare subsidy. The childcare crisis in Oklahoma must be reversed and a change in incentives and requirements by the state must change so that all families have the ability to place their child in quality childcare.
- B. Identify strategies for financing and/or financial incentives to increase investments for early childhood programs and services in the geographic area. Consider local, state, federal and private investments.
  - a. Strategy 1: Due to the severe budget issues within the state of Oklahoma it is obvious that searching out state funding is not the best use of time or resources for financing of any kind. Oklahoma state budget deficits have occurred for the past 5 years. Therefore it is unrealistic to continue seeking out state funding during this time.
  - b. Strategy 2: Private foundations are a viable solution for financing of early childhood programs. Many of the programs who have received state funding in the past are used to the reporting process as well as the tracking of data needed for reporting that private foundations are now requiring of their funded partners. Private foundations ask for viable, reliable, proven programs which many of our early childhood programs are able to show.
  - c. Strategy 3: With the current political climate and the unknown changes of the new President it would be unwise to search out additional federal funding.
  - d. Strategy 4: Local funding, however, remains a practical solution. Businesses, organizations, and private individuals like to see their donations used in the communities in which they operate. Capitalizing on locally owned and operated businesses will be a viable way to make up lost state and federal dollars.
  - e. Strategy 5: Deletion of duplication of services would allow for resources to be reallocated. See Page 1 of this report for explanation.
  - f. Strategy 6: Incentives for Childcare centers to become 3 starred and to provide non-traditional hours must be done.
  - g. Strategy 7: Realign the Oklahoma state budget to emphasize and value the importance of education. Investment in early childhood literacy and education is a must and without it our state will fail to proceed in any valuable way.

- C. Provide state-level policy, procedures and/or funding recommendations to the Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness Board to improve conditions for young children and their families in the targeted geographic area.
  - a. State-level policies are often a hindrance for families to receive services. Often state-level policies are made for urban area needs and are made by those who are not service users and/or providers. Both of these cause turbulence when serving a rural, low income area with a strong military presence.
  - b. We would recommend that any future state-level policies, procedures, and/or funding recommendations require an advisory panel of state wide service users and providers. We believe that with an advisory panel of both service users and providers that only viable policies and doable procedures will be made. Practical procedures and policies need to come from service users and providers not from legislative policy made by policy makers that are often far removed from the services offered.
  - c. Funding recommendations for Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness Board is that each program receiving funding must prove both viable and have proven results. Note: each geographic area will have a different set of results due to the needs of that area.

#### Citations

The Community School Readiness Assessment by United Way of Southwest Oklahoma, Success By 6 Program.