

Smart Beginnings Shenandoah Valley

Focus Group Findings

Page County Locality September-October 2009

From August 28 through September 28, 2009, four focus groups were held in Page County with 34 participants (8 providers, 6 parents, 10 business, and 10 school personnel). The purpose of the focus groups was to gain input from key stakeholders into the assets and needs of the community as they relate to children being ready to learn and succeed when they enter school. The results of the focus groups along with statistical data will be used to develop an action plan for Page County and contribute to the development of a regional strategic plan encompassing the counties of Augusta, Page, Rockingham and Shenandoah and the cities of Harrisonburg, Staunton, and Waynesboro.

The Page County focus groups were sponsored by Smart Beginnings Shenandoah Valley (SBSV), a regional coalition and the Page County Locality Team. Smart Beginnings Shenandoah Valley has as its vision: A diverse community where every family is supported and has access to quality programs and resources for their young child. Its Mission is to help all children enter school healthy and prepared to succeed.

The SBSV Community Assessment is based on a collaborative system of four components that include 1) Early Learning and Family Support, 2) Special Needs/Early Intervention, 3) Health, Mental Health, and Nutrition and 4) Community Support. As research demonstrates, these components work together to ensure all children have access to services and programs which promote school readiness.

For the purpose of this report, the four components are defined as follows:

- 1) Early Learning and Family Support – early care and education opportunities provided in nurturing environments where children can learn what they need to achieve success in school and life. Families have access to economic and parenting supports to ensure children have nurturing and stable relationships with caring adults. This component is further divided into *Ready Parents* and *Ready Children*.
- 2) Special Needs/Early Intervention – early identification, assessment, and appropriate services for children with special health care needs, disabilities, or developmental delays. Early Intervention services focus on children birth to age 3; Child Find services are offered through the public school system and focus on children ages 3 years to 5 years.
- 3) Health, Mental Health, and Nutrition – comprehensive health services that meet children’s vision, hearing, nutrition, behavioral, and oral health as well as medical health needs, with services provided within their community whenever possible.

- 4) Community Support – key components within a community that work collaboratively to support families and children by promoting optimal early childhood development.

Participants in all four focus groups were posed question related to accessibility of affordable and high quality child care, available community services for parents and children, gaps in community services, education/ training opportunities for parents and child care providers focused on early childhood development, services and/or programs viewed as assets within the community, characteristics of *ready children* and *ready parents*, feasibility of attracting and retaining employees who are parents with young children by local businesses, and barriers to children entering school ready to learn.

Major Findings

The following findings were noteworthy:

Ready Parents – Business, parents, and providers all identified a lack of understanding by many parents related to early childhood development and appropriate developmental activities. Parent and business groups identified the absence of a support network for families with young children.

Ready Children -Participants in all the focus groups cited a lack of high quality child care in the community most especially for infants (birth to 24 months), sick child care, and after school care for school-age children. Parents and school personnel further cited a lack of child care options, i.e. center based, family day home as well as concerns regarding available hours and affordable cost. As one parent shared, “For what I can afford, care is mediocre or poor so I choose mediocre.”

Special Needs and Early Intervention – A need for increased and improved communication between school and the medical community was noted by school personnel. Parents, providers, and school participants also recognized the absence of any early identification or intervention services (for children ages birth to 24 months) in the community. Families must travel outside the county to receive services.

Health, Mental Health, and Nutrition – Business and parents cited the lack of after-hour medical care as an issue; business also felt there was a lack of emphasis on *preventive* medical care. Providers, parents, and school personnel noted a complete lack of child mental health services within the county as well as an absence of medical specialists who provide child diagnostic services.

Community Support – Parents, providers, businesses, and school personnel all identified a lack of transportation as an issue. There also existed a lack of knowledge among all groups of available resources for families with young children.

Summary

A summary follows of the responses to the questions for each topic area.

Early Learning and Family Support

Ready Parents

Businesses focused their comments on the poor work ethic of their younger employees, some who are parents, who tend to 'live in the moment.' Also cited was a lack of financial literacy and budgeting skills for many families as evidenced by regular requests by employees for pay advancements. Some businesses cited the quandary they face employing teenagers. Often teenagers are working to help support their families and are also required to babysit younger siblings while parents work. When the teenager's and the parents' work schedule conflicts, it is the teenager who must call in sick in order to babysit siblings.

Businesses indicated they would like to see a parent mentor program in place to provide a support network for families with young children, especially for very young parents and families new to the area who do not have extended family in the community; parents and school personnel concurred. Parent and providers noted that parents lack knowledge in early childhood development and appropriate developmental milestones. It was shared by parents, providers, and school personnel that many parents seem unprepared to send their child to kindergarten.

Ready Children

All participants reported a lack of high quality child care in the community, most especially for infants (birth to 24 months), sick child care, and after school care for school-age children. It was noted that there is only one (1) licensed family provider and one (1) center in Page County providing infant care. As one parent noted, "I don't know what I am going to do when my daughter turns 2 (years old), there just are not many options that offer high quality and affordability." It was reported that two of the four licensed centers in the area had recently closed their doors due to low enrollment (most likely due to the community's rising unemployment rate - fewer working parents equates to a decreased need for child care settings).

Parents, providers, and school personnel all reported affordability of child care to be an issue stating it was cost prohibitive to have more than one child in child care and several stated they had friends who did not return to work after the second child was born because child care was no longer affordable or child care that fit into their work schedule was not available.

Center-based providers reported the high rate of turnover of employees due to long hours, low pay, and lack of benefits. Other providers stated they recognized the need for more available infant care but were not able to meet the need. As one licensed provider stated "We don't provide infant care because it is cost prohibitive for us to employ the additional staff to meet the licensing requirements of ratios without increasing our rates - which would make us unaffordable to many of our parents." Furthermore, providers stated the required professional trainings to maintain licensing requirements and enhance high quality child care are provided outside Page County and are often limited in scope.

The need for increased communication between child care providers and families with school personnel as it relates to the transition to kindergarten was identified by parent and provider groups. Providers felt they could better support the school system in preparing children and parents for the transition to school if they knew what was expected by the schools. They could also provide general information to questions parents often ask before registering their child. Parents also felt they could better prepare their children to enter school, with more face to face (as opposed to written) communication with the schools. Conversely, this need was not noted by school personnel.

Special Needs and Early Intervention

School personnel cited a need for increased and improved communication between schools and the medical community as many medical providers do not appear to be aware of Child Find services available through the school system for children ages 3-5 and are not yet enrolled in school. These services can be accessed for assessments related to developmental delays, speech concerns, etc. It was reported that currently, parents are being referred for this type of testing outside the community, i.e. Harrisonburg or Charlottesville.

Parents, providers, and school personnel also recognized the absence of any early identification or intervention services for children age birth to 24 months located in the community. Again, families must travel outside of Page County (Harrisonburg or Charlottesville) to receive the services. This service has been provided in the past but most recently has been all but discontinued due to budget cuts.

Health, Mental Health, and Nutrition

Currently there is very limited access to after-hours medical care other than going to the local emergency room at Page Memorial Hospital. The only option is the Convenient Care Service recently started through the hospital to provide minor illness care.

Business reported a lack of community emphasis on preventive or wellness care in the community, noting that most medical services seem to *treat* illness rather than *prevent* illness.

All participants recognized the lack of medical and mental health services in the community for young children. Diagnostic services for young children were also viewed as missing. As one person stated “We do not have any medical specialists in our community focused on children...not even a pediatrician.” A parent noted, “I can access medical care here for me, but I have to take my child to Harrisonburg to see a pediatrician. The gas and time in transportation adds up, but it is worth it to me.”

Community Support

All groups identified a lack of transportation as a barrier to accessing services in the community. This related to a lack of available community transit and also to families with only one car or only one car working and the employed family member needing to use it to get to work. Significant travel distance exists between local towns with Luray being the center of most activities and services.

Family activities with young children appear mostly to center on children's sports activities with some families visiting local parks, hiking in the Shenandoah National Park, or walking the Luray Greenway. Some family activities (i.e. story hour) are offered through the public library but they generally occur during the work day which prevents working families from accessing them. Saturday hours have been cut due to budget constraints. The Gus Bus Literacy Vehicle was noted as an asset.

Affordable rental housing was reported as a more recent challenge for the business community. With many homes having been foreclosed on, these displaced families have moved into the available rental housing. This leaves few, if any options for new employees moving into the community by limiting the number of rental properties available. New employees are forced to seek housing outside the county which in turn lead to higher transportation costs and longer workdays which in turn lead to difficulties in securing child care due to an extended work day.

Businesses reported a better than average applicant pool with many hiring overqualified people. Many applicants are from outside the community.

Most businesses did not see themselves as performing a leadership role in addressing the needs of families with young children within the community. Several did state they preferred to remain 'behind the scenes' and donate goods or provide financial support when possible.

There was a lack of knowledge reported among all groups of resources available to families with young children. A single point of contact or entry to services is not available in Page County causing public awareness of available services to be limited to personal experience. Furthermore, all groups reported a lack of community knowledge surrounding the importance of early childhood development. As one parent noted, "We need to be a community that surrounds young children – they are the future of our community."