

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Expert Committee

Report to the Community

Recommendations

on Program &

Service Priorities



EARLY CHILDHOOD COUNCIL OF BOULDER COUNTY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Early Childhood Council of Boulder County (ECCBC) is a collaborative network of more than 150 local organizations and individuals. It is the primary forum for the countywide planning process that includes the coordination of programs and policies related to families and young children. ECCBC has been working toward the implementation of a comprehensive system of early childhood programs and services for Boulder County since its inception in 1996. In pursuit of the design of a comprehensive system, ECCBC has been engaged in an extensive system development process in collaboration with many countywide stakeholders.

This document summarizes the results of a key step in the process: the convening of a committee of early childhood experts. Boulder County is fortunate to have a strong base of professionals with extensive expertise in early childhood programs and services. As part of the ECCBC system development process, 25 of these professionals were convened as the Expert Committee and charged with identifying: the key services and programs that comprise a comprehensive early childhood system, the needs and gaps in current service delivery, and the top priorities for development and/or expansion of services and programs. This group relied on a wealth of local data, expertise at the state and national levels, and committee deliberations to fulfill their charge. As a result, the Expert Committee identified six priorities to be addressed in order to achieve the vision of a comprehensive early childhood system in Boulder County:

PRIORITY 1

Child care and early education providers will be paid a wage that is commensurate with qualifications and responsibilities.

A community that values children must also value the workforce that serves those children. Child care and early education providers typically earn considerably less than their counterparts in other fields with equivalent education and experience, which contributes to the high turnover seen in this field. Compensation is one of the top determinants of program quality as it is linked to turnover as well as other factors such as provider qualifications, ability to access ongoing education and training opportunities, and provider morale. Compensation initiatives adopted in other communities have demonstrated success in improving the educational qualifications and retention of the child care and early education workforce.

PRIORITY 2

All families will have access to preventive health, dental health and mental health services including screening and referrals.

Research shows that children learn better when they are healthy, and early detection and treatment of vision, hearing, dental, and developmental concerns increases the likelihood of academic success. While data is limited on the prevalence of mental health issues in Boulder County, the Expert Committee identified undetected mental health needs of families as a key area of concern. Universal health (to include dental) and mental health screening allows for a prevention-based approach, and would reduce the number of children and families who “fall through the cracks.”



PRIORITY 3

Child care and early education subsidy programs will promote equity and quality for all families.

Current child care subsidy programs do not have the capacity to serve all eligible families. Families participating in subsidy programs may not have the same options for child care as “full pay” families for various reasons. Reasons include limited incentives for providers to accept families in subsidy programs, perceived barriers to accepting low-income families, and subsidized slots that are part time and may not meet the needs of working parents. Furthermore, many families do not qualify for income-based subsidy programs but are still unable to afford high quality child care and early education. The Experts recommend a countywide system of subsidy that establishes a benchmark percent of family income to be spent on child care and early education for young children.

PRIORITY 4

Unmet demand for child care and early education will be quantified and addressed.

The Experts agree that there is unmet demand for quality, affordable care across the board, and particularly for the following groups: infants and toddlers, children with special needs, and Spanish-speaking children. A countywide child care and early education needs assessment will be completed in the summer of 2009 and will provide important information to quantify unmet demand. In the meantime, existing data and anecdotal evidence are compelling. The Experts agree that efforts to address as well as precisely quantify unmet demand should occur simultaneously.

PRIORITY 5

Child care and early education providers will be equipped to address the whole child.

Addressing the whole child includes understanding the critical links between early learning, physical and social-emotional well-being, cognitive, first and second language development, and family and cultural values. The Experts indicated that while training for providers is important in increasing their ability to address the whole child, there is a gap between learning that takes place and the implementation of knowledge in day-to-day interactions with children. Ongoing, on-site coaching and mentoring would help connect knowledge and practice in a sustainable and effective way.

PRIORITY 6

Native language and literacy will be supported for all children and families.

Parental literacy is one of the single most important indicators of a child's school readiness and the Experts identified a need for greater appreciation of the connection between parental and child literacy. Furthermore, research indicates that cognitive and academic development in the first language has a vital and positive effect on second language schooling; if children do not reach a minimal threshold in their first language, including literacy, they may experience cognitive difficulties in the second language. Assessing unmet demand for child care and early education for Spanish-speaking children, as proposed above, will be an essential step in addressing this priority.



OTHER KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The importance of parent engagement and family support¹

Parental behavior during the early years of a child's life is critical to the development of positive social and cognitive skills in children. Model programs such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project that have demonstrated lasting benefits and return on investment have included intensive work with parents to create meaningful connections between home and school. An overarching theme in the Expert Committee dialogue was the importance of engaging and supporting parents as the primary teachers and nurturers of their children, something that should be emphasized in pursuing all of the priorities and recommendations of this report. Providing services and programs for parents can be challenging, as parents' knowledge, interests, and preferences are diverse. The input of parents will be vital throughout the design and implementation of additional services and programs.

The importance of public support for child care and early education

The Expert Committee was charged with identifying gaps in services and programs. However, a major gap identified in their process is one that involves the broader community: child care and early education needs to be recognized and valued as a public investment and human right. An extensive body of research demonstrates that investments in high-quality early childhood programs yield substantial short and long-term benefits that far outweigh their initial costs. These benefits are realized not only by participating children and families, but by the community as a whole. The Experts felt strongly that a communication campaign to raise awareness and public support in Boulder County would be critical to the successful implementation of a comprehensive early childhood system.

Designing strategies to address these priorities will take concerted effort by many individuals and organizations. The full Report to the Community provides additional data, as well as recommendations from the Experts on how each priority could be addressed. It concludes with a summary of next steps that will ensure that the work of the Expert Committee will be used in the design and implementation of a comprehensive early childhood system in Boulder County.

The role of the Expert Committee has now been delegated to the ECCBC Advisory Council to insure that recommendations for the design of a comprehensive early childhood system for all families with young children in Boulder County will be updated "in real time."

¹ Edwards, C.P., Sheridan, S.M., and Knoche, L. Parent Engagement and School Readiness: Parent-Child Relationships in Early Learning. University of Nebraska: 2008.



Full copies of the Report to the Community may be obtained from the ECCBC website:
www.earlychildhoodbouldercounty.org or by contacting:

Bobbie Watson - Director, Early Childhood Council of Boulder County
303-441-3181 | watsonb@bouldercolorado.gov
2160 Spruce Street, Boulder CO 80302