

Assessing the Needs and Capacity of Northwest Kansas for Access to Quality Early Child Care: Engaging Communities to Build Coalitions Targeting Sustainable Early Childhood Development Initiatives

Overview

We seek to conduct a needs assessment, and start the work of building Early Childhood Coalitions (ECC) to begin working toward the goal of meeting the needs for quality early childhood education opportunities for families in the Northwest (NW) Area. The project for which we seek support is the first step in the longer process of engaging with, and meeting the needs of our local communities in Kansas. Quality childcare and early childhood education opportunities have been linked to multiple positive outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. Additionally, Family and Consumer Sciences Specialists out of Manhattan have historically neglected the NW Area of Kansas. We seek to respond to a pressing need brought to KSRE in Manhattan by our Extension field faculty (Agents), and the NW Area Family and Consumer Sciences Specialist, Libby Curry by examining the exact needs, assets, and capacity for NW Area communities to make meaningful, and positive differences in early childhood development. This proposal aligns with the legacy of previous CECD Engagement Grant awards in the following domains: a) Community asset identification and mapping, strategic planning, and resource development b) Technical assistance on issues such as environment, public health, **education**, housing, transportation, and **small business development** c) Training and educational programs that will strengthen the economic and/or social well-being of people, and d) Programs aimed at bettering the lives of underserved populations.

Need

Multiple analyses of the long-term effects of quality childcare have indicated multilayer effects on individuals, families, and communities. Additionally, we know that children in poverty are even more susceptible to the risk factors associated with poor or no access to quality childcare and education opportunities. Finally, the types of care, Family Child Care (FCC) or Child Care Center (CCC), have effects on outcomes as well.

Individuals, families, and communities. Exposure to quality learning settings in early childhood have profound influence on long-term outcomes, as environmental influences during this period affect individual cognitive development and learning, behavior, and physical and mental health over the lifespan (e.g., Elman et al., 1996). 24% of U.S. children under age 4 with employed mothers spend many hours in childcare centers (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011). Improving quality of child care experiences is critical given reports of the sustained positive effects of exposure to higher quality child care (e.g., Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Landry, et al., 2014). However, children in poverty are more likely to spend many hours each day in low-quality childcare as opposed to their peers from more affluent families. (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Childcare Research Network, 2000). These children are more likely to receive inadequate home supports because of parents' own life stresses and limited resources (e.g., Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984; Hammond, Landry, Swank, & Smith, 2000). We have known for quite some time that children who can least afford to fall behind are most likely *not* to receive the kinds of care that promote brain development and keep them consistent with their peers from advantaged homes (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994).

Availability of Quality Childcare. From the latest data available (Child Care Aware, 2011), Rooks County, KS had no childcare centers, and combined with no Head Start / Early Head Start, 93% of the children receiving childcare were in Family Child Care (FCC), including group, licensed, and registered family child care homes. Note: these numbers do not reflect a child or children being cared for by a stay-at-home parent. These are licensed Family Child Care facilities, meaning that an adult provides childcare out of his or her own home. Likewise, in Phillips County, 94% were in FCC, and there were no CCC's or Early / Head Start. In fact, in the five counties we propose including in this project, in 2010 there were a total of six CCC's / Head Start Centers serving only 92 of the 660 children needing care in these counties. None of these FCC's or CCC's are accredited by NAEYC or NAFCC indicating that these facilities are not seeking recognition for meeting acceptable standards for quality early childcare. While there could be several reasons for this, we know that NAEYC and NAFCC accredited facilities provide a standard of care demonstrated to have positive effects on child outcomes, while unaccredited facilities vary widely in standard of care. Additionally, family poverty in these counties hovers around 20% in these communities, which is a contributing risk factor to poor child outcomes (Child Care Aware).

Project Description

The Extension model for improving the lives of Kansans usually begins by taking research results from K-State and other institutions of higher education, translating these results into usable products, and delivering them. However, this project fulfills the often-overlooked step of this recursive process, learning from the field and adapting our research and development efforts to meet these needs. This project developed from field faculty in KSRE, including Melinda Daily, Anna Muir, and Libby Curry as they have worked in their communities in NW Kansas. Our specific aims are to do the following:

- 1) Conduct a formal needs assessment in the Rooks-Phillips and Sunflower Extension Districts in Northwest Kansas around issues related to childcare and early childhood education and development.
- 2) Identify community capacity for addressing these issues, and strategically plan and develop resources to improve early childhood education and better the lives of families in the NW Area by responding to the unique needs of these communities.
- 3) Conduct a study of the implementation science and community development implications of early child development consortia in these underserved counties.
- 4) Share our research findings within the Extension system and with other researchers and practitioners across the country through presentations and publications.

We propose that Dr. Bradford Wiles, Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist in Early Childhood, serve as the primary investigator for this project. Dr. Wiles joined the faculty at Kansas State in July of 2013, and he is steadily working on building his network and contributing his skill set for the betterment of Kansas. We see this funding opportunity as a chance to accomplish a key goal of strengthening the working relationship between campus, Extension, and community members in building relationships across the state, including building credibility of and with KSRE field faculty, securing internal funding to set the stage for pursuing external funding, and furthering the outreach and engagement of our Manhattan-based Specialists throughout the state. Our team of applied developmental scientists and practitioners is important because of the perspectives and skill sets each team member contributes to meet the demands of this project. Below are the team members we propose to be part of the Research Team, as well as our target stakeholders and key informants for the needs assessment and community capacity development efforts:

Research Team

Bradford B. Wiles, Ph.D. - Extension Specialist, Early Childhood Development
Bronwyn Fees, Ph.D. - Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education
Jay A. Mancini, Ph.D. - Haltiwanger Distinguished Professor The University of Georgia
Libby Curry - Extension Specialist, Family & Consumer Sciences, NW Area
Anna Muir - Extension Agent, Phillips-Rooks District
Melinda Daily - Extension Agent, Sunflower District

Key Informants / Target Stakeholders

Early Childhood Education Practitioners and Administrators (e.g. Head Start)
 Local Kansas Department of Health and Environment
 Local Kansas Department of Children and Families (e.g. Tiny K., Infant and Toddler Services)
 Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (e.g. Child Care Aware)
 Local School Districts
 Chambers of Commerce
 Families with Young Children

Theoretical Perspective

We seek to engage local stakeholders in the needs assessment, resource development and planning, and feasibility studies related to this work. We take a Community Social Organization (Mancini, Bowen, & Martin, 2005; Mancini & Bowen, 2013) theoretical perspective on action and change. This social organization theory supports building community capacity, which is driven by shared responsibility and collective competence as the fundamental situations and processes that allow communities to provide desired supports to families (see: Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000; Mancini & Bowen, 2009 for a comprehensive review). By using an empirically tested, and theoretically driven approach to community engagement and development, we will be able to identify leverage points for effecting change in these communities. Because Dr. Jay Mancini has agreed to support our work, we have a unique opportunity to operate in complete congruence with the cutting edge of one of the social sciences' most promising theories.

Objectives, Activities, and Benchmarks

The main goal of the project is to identify what current resources are available, bring the stakeholders around these resources together to form a group working toward the common goal of positive early childhood development, and provide specific strategies for meeting the needs of the populations in the NW Area Districts we are exploring.

Building on the success of the DoD / USDA Child Care and Youth Training and Technical Assistance Project (CYTTAP) grant on which Dr. Wiles is a co-PI, this project seeks to build the capacity of Extension to more effectively help communities meet their childcare needs. Because of the intersection of the capacity for Extension to focus on early childhood, and the needs assessment for access to quality childcare, we believe this to be an opportune moment to capitalize on the momentum we have been building around early childhood development, and eventually provide a valuable, methodically identified, service and skill set to the NW Area target communities in response to their needs.

The project will proceed in three overlapping processes, specifically, they are: *needs assessment*, *identifying and planning future development strategies*, and a *process evaluation* of the work. We have already begun some of the tasks to design a needs assessment, such as defining the issue, identifying our target population, and establishing a planning team. With the funding from the CECD, we will determine the current capacity of communities within the targeted Extension

Districts to provide adequate quality and quantity of childcare. We plan to first conduct a brief survey of stakeholders to assess the access, affordability, and availability of childcare. We will then assess the quality of the childcare available by interviewing families and other stakeholders about the kinds of care environments children experience. We will also survey these communities about the desirability of affordable, quality, childcare in their area. Because we are mindful of the goals of the participating organizations and individuals, we will share the needs assessment information to help the interested stakeholders make better decisions about the size, scope, and other parameters of any proposed solutions to childcare issues in the NW Area communities. We use the Needs Assessment Framework (NOAA, 2012), a well-established and empirically tested framework to guide and tailor our process for exploring the needs of the NW Area Communities.

The process evaluation will be used to measure the effectiveness of the leadership team in performing the proposed activities and accomplishing the goals of the project. Additionally, analysis of these data will be useful to disseminate through the applied scholarly research journals, as we anticipate learning valuable lessons about working with rural, underserved, and impoverished communities, which will be useful for other applied developmental scientists as they seek to build community capacity and enhance social organization in their own communities.

We will measure our success based on the ability to successfully conduct the following activities:

- 1) Determining the knowledge, skills, abilities, incentives, supports, motivations, opinions, and cultural characteristics of the target communities around the issues of childcare quality and access
- 2) Identifying the methods, instruments, and sampling adequate to assess the needs of these communities
- 3) Gather, record, analyze, and manage data to provide the basis for a report on the childcare needs of these communities
- 4) Synthesize and integrate the analysis results into a report that identifies specific strategies for securing and sustaining solutions to this problem
- 5) Disseminate both this report, and the process evaluation results through community presentations and scholarly journals (e.g. *Journal of Extension*)

Outcomes

- 1) The NW Area will have a formal, theoretically driven, and scientifically conducted needs assessment targeting available quality childcare.
- 2) Extension will be uniquely positioned to engage the NW Area communities to build capacity and meet the childcare needs of these communities.
- 3) The communities will have established Early Childcare Coalitions to plan for and address the needs of their communities.
- 4) Dr. Wiles, and the communities and field faculty involved, will have the data and results to pursue additional funding (e.g. USDA / DHHS grants) to meet the stated needs for these communities, and will have opportunity to build partnerships, establish credibility, and publish results for the greater body of knowledge on building childcare resources in Kansas and other rural areas.

Timeline

July - Meet with partners to identify stakeholders at the local level with an interest in childcare quality and access

August-October - Select and pilot test measures for collecting data from key informants and stakeholders (i.e. surveys, focus groups, guided interviews) on both the target issue and process of the project. Secure IRB approval for the process evaluation.

November-January - Hold the first meetings of a the proposed Childcare Coalition which would bring key stakeholders together to identify the knowledge, skills, abilities, incentives, supports, motivations, opinions, and cultural characteristics available to build upon for the future

February-May - Analyze the collected data and develop a report to be provided to community leadership (e.g. PDC's, Chambers of Commerce, School Boards, County Commissioners) to provide direction and identify funding opportunities to build capacity around childcare issues. Develop a manuscript from the process evaluation to be presented at a regional or national conference.

June-July - Submit manuscript to journal and develop presentations. Pursue additional external funding to meet the needs for quality childcare in the NW area.

Funding Requested

We seek support for a graduate research assistant for two semesters at \$5,000 per semester for a total of \$10,000.

However, to ensure the success of the project we have secured matching support from the School of Family Studies and Human Services to add \$1,000, and Dr. Wiles is willing to match another \$2,000 from his research start-up funds to support this project. The additional \$3,000 will be used for travel, materials, and miscellaneous expenses, including printing, communications, and technology relating to the project.