READY FOR SCHOOL, READY TO SUCCEED

Preparing Children for Kindergarten

Capital Region Education Task Force
REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY
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Facilitated by
THE ISSUE

Disparities in School Readiness and School Achievement

Within the Capital Region, significant disparities exist around school readiness and achievement. Reading is an important indicator of this issue as it reflects a child’s preparedness for school and future academic life.

Children generally are learning to read until third grade. By the fourth grade, they should be reading to learn. After that, coursework gets harder and reading becomes more challenging. Students who don’t read well have increasing difficulty keeping up. In fact, children who aren’t reading at grade level by the end of third grade are four times as likely to drop out of high school. Fortunately, there are proven methods to boost students’ reading skills and school success by focusing on the early years of a child’s life to include formal and informal prekindergarten programming.


To identify and understand the needs in our community, United Way of the Capital Region formed a partnership with the Harrisburg Regional Chamber, West Shore Chamber of Commerce, The Foundation for Enhancing Communities and Cumberland, Dauphin and Perry counties.

Throughout 2014, this partnership conducted a comprehensive assessment of life in our community, which captured data about trends in health and human service needs, as well as community perceptions about the issues and opportunities facing the Capital Region. The result was a unique and comprehensive look at our community.

“Life in the Capital Region: 2014 Assessment of Our Community” examined health and human service issues in Cumberland, Dauphin and Perry counties through the lens of community “building blocks” of health, education, income and basic needs, as these are essential for a good quality of life and strong community.
Key findings from this study:

- In Cumberland County, 79 percent (4,105) of children age three to four lack access to quality prekindergarten programming.
- In Dauphin County, 75 percent (5,065) of children age three to four lack access to quality prekindergarten programming.
- In Perry County, 92 percent (1,026) of children age three to four lack access to quality prekindergarten programming.
- Pennsylvania ranks 45th in the nation for state-funded education.

Students not proficient in reading:
- Perry: 28%
- Dauphin: 33%
- Cumberland: 20%

Students not proficient in math:
- Perry: 23%
- Dauphin: 29%
- Cumberland: 17%
A New Approach to Solving Critical Community Issues

To meet its mission of improving lives in Cumberland, Dauphin and Perry counties, United Way of the Capital Region is helping lead the community in a new approach to problem-solving called collective impact.

This approach requires that everyone – businesses, cities and towns, nonprofits, schools, places of worship, labor unions, foundations and individuals - work together to find new and different ways to address the challenges facing our community and develop lasting solutions. In addition to collaboration, the core of collective impact includes several unique factors to include:

- The creation of solutions and strategies by nonbiased experts
- Leading backbone organization and solution partners working toward a common goal
- Methods to measure and report progress to the community
- Shared resources

In October 2015, United Way facilitated the creation of the Capital Region Education Task Force to develop potential solutions and strategies to move the needle on the disparities in school readiness and achievement. While United Way played the role of convener, the Education Task Force was a community effort.
Helping children and youth overcome obstacles to thrive in the classroom is important at all stages of education. While areas such as summer learning, middle grade success and on-time graduation are critical, the Education Task Force recommends an immediate focus on school readiness as the starting point of our community’s work. As the proposed initiative grows, additional resources and activities could focus on the early years of school to help more children be reading proficiently by third grade, which is measured by the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA).

School readiness is a measure of how prepared a child is to succeed in school, cognitively, socially and emotionally. Just as there is an achievement gap in school performance, there is a school readiness gap that separates disadvantaged children from their more affluent peers.

By concentrating on early learning, the proposed initiative work will focus on the root causes of education disparities to help give children the support they need to begin a successful school experience. As our community’s work in this area grows, the Education Task Force foresees future work in other areas of education to ensure local youth are graduating on time.
Importance of Early Learning

According to Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a child’s earliest years are a critical period of brain development, laying the foundation for cognitive growth as well as social and emotional development. High-quality early learning programs can help level the playing field, especially for low-income children, by boosting school performance and self-sufficiency over a lifetime.

High-quality prekindergarten is a proven investment – every dollar spent returns up to $17 in reduced crime, education and social services savings, as well as resulting in higher earnings and increased taxes paid in adulthood.

While research demonstrates the benefits of high-quality prekindergarten programs, a significant number of families in the Capital Region are unaware – or cannot afford – these services. In addition, many affordable childcare services are currently at capacity, leaving families to find other options. According to the Pennsylvania Partnership for Children, only 8.1 percent of child care slots for children birth to four years old in the state are in the highest-quality programs, meaning they have been accredited or recognized by the state for their programming.

Consideration must be given to connecting parents with child care resources and service to provide an alternative prekindergarten experience that prepares children to enter kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed.

Barriers to Early Learning

Throughout their work, the Education Task Force considered the barriers that often keep children from entering school ready to learn. These can include, but are not limited to:

- **Lack of family engagement** – Many families don’t understand the importance of early learning
- **Limited resources** – Far too many families don’t have the financial resources to purchase books and education materials to help their children learn
- **Disconnect between early learning centers and schools** – Early learning centers and other child care providers don’t always interact with local schools to know the expectations for children entering kindergarten. Looking at the other side of the coin, schools are rarely aware of an incoming student’s strengths and weaknesses.
- **A “silo” approach to programs and services** – Many successful early learning programs exist within our community, but they are limited in reach and/or do not connect with the broad spectrum of people who can influence a child’s life in addition to immediate family members. This can include, but is not limited to places of worship, the medical community, police officers, bookmobiles and human service and community organizations.
TRANSIENT POPULATIONS

- Families moving throughout the year can disrupt a child’s learning and often cause confusion about which school district and school a child will enter for kindergarten.

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

- For families with English as a second language, understanding the current resources available can be a significant challenge.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY

- Child care centers often lack a diverse teaching staff, which can be a stumbling block for children who are looking to relate to their educators.

TRANSPORTATION

- Low-income families often rely on public transportation and may not be able to afford the cost, or struggle with the limitations/schedule of public transportation.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES

After researching successful models and best practices, the Education Task Force recommends solutions and strategies to develop and formalize partnerships with parents and extended family members, child care centers, nonprofits, schools, places of worship and hospitals to prepare preschool children to enter kindergarten ready to learn.
When creating these proposed solutions and strategies substantial thought was given to the number of children not enrolled in a formalized child care center. The Education Task Force believes a significant impact can be made to prepare children for school by engaging their families. By empowering parents and family members with the resources and connections to services, children in the Capital Region can get on the path to a successful education. At all times, transportation, cultural competency and attention to diversity must be considered.
IMPLEMENTING CHANGE THROUGH A PILOT PROJECT

The Education Task Force is proposing the development of a six-year pilot project utilizing early education liaisons to help local families connect with existing resources and services to prepare children to enter kindergarten ready to learn. Over the course of the pilot project, efforts will expand to support resources and activities to help more children be reading proficiently by third grade.

The project is scalable to ensure it can grow in capacity to improve lives in the Capital Region and begin to move the needle on the priority issue of disparities in school readiness and achievement. The success of the pilot project involves the recruitment of the right solution partners with everyone working together toward the same goal.

The pilot project may start in one school but must be a model that can be replicated in additional schools and school districts to include rural, suburban and urban settings.
Recommended Pilot Project

Role of Early Education Liaisons

Early education liaisons will serve low-income constituents with the greatest disparities in school readiness. The focus of their work will be through the lens of each school they work with to tailor approaches to help at-risk, preschool children be prepared to enter kindergarten. The liaisons must understand and practice cultural competency and sensitivity to understand the dynamics of diverse family structures.

The work of early education liaisons will include, but will not be limited to:

• Connecting low-income families with free and low-cost education resources.

• Educating parents on the value of early learning and helping them connect to child care centers in the community.

• Working with participating schools to create a common assessment tool, such as the PA Department of Education Early Learning Assessment Tool to ensure families, child care centers and support organizations are “working from the same playbook” to prepare children to enter kindergarten.

• Helping parents of preschoolers and child care providers connect to schools early on to prepare children to enter kindergarten. The earlier the better to help children “hit the ground running” when they enter school.

• Working with transient populations to help families stay connected with education engagement.

• Helping families with English as a second language overcome communication barriers.

• Creating opportunities for families to interact with schools, human service organizations, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, places of worship and other community organizations focusing on early education efforts.

• Connecting parents to adult literacy programs and effective parenting programs that promote academic success.

• Helping create a common method of information sharing among families, schools and supporting organizations about upcoming events, deadlines and announcements about programs and services targeting early learning. This might be a physical “hub” such as a library or community building and/or an electronic service such as text messages or brief informational videos.

• Utilizing technology to support online learning programs and mobile apps like ReadyRosie to share with families and child care providers.

• Helping families with transportation issues to get them and their children to their child care provider and work.
Recommended Core Solution Partners
(for initial work of the pilot projects)

**United Way of the Capital Region – Backbone Organization**

As the backbone organization, United Way of the Capital Region would:

- Serve as a convener of the core solution partners to help facilitate the development and implementation of the pilot project.
- Take the initial lead on funding this project, with an anticipated budget of $225,000. In addition, United Way would mobilize funding to support the activities of the initiative as it grows.
- Guide vision and strategy
- Support aligned activities
- Establish shared measurement practices
- Build public will
- Advance policy
Capital Area Intermediate Unit – Primary Service Provider

The Education Task Force believes the Capital Area Intermediate Unit is the logical choice to serve as the direct service provider, as the organization has experience working with children in the target age group, diverse populations and schools and school districts throughout the region.

As the primary service provider, the Capital Area Intermediate Unit would:

- Staff and house the early education liaisons
- Ensure liaisons receive required training
- Provide case management services
- Conduct community outreach and education efforts

Other core solution partners could include, but are not limited to:

- Schools and schools districts (rural, suburban and urban settings)
- State and local government
- Places of worship
- Formal and informal child care providers
- Social and human service providers
- Health care providers
- Local police
- Other funders like private foundations, corporations, grant-makers
- Libraries
- Research institution or organization to support an assessment tool for school readiness as well as methods to measure short-, middle- and long-term achievement with the goal of reading proficiency by third grade.
- Subject experts
Ready for School, Ready to Succeed

While the Education Task Force has worked to create this report, similar task groups in the areas of health and income have been working to propose solutions and strategies to move the needle on these critical issues facing our community. We know that each area impacts the other. When an individual and family have a sound path to health, education and earning a living wage, they are on the road to breaking the cycle of poverty and creating a cycle of success. This work is critical to improving lives in the Capital Region.

For more information on this report, please contact United Way of the Capital Region at 717.732.0700.
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