

Early CHILDHOOD

As an expectant mother and a step-mom to a four-year-old, the experiences I have had over the last nearly two years of working on early childhood initiatives with the Community Foundation have taught me much about the significance of these early years. Having had no prior experience in this field, I first got lost in a sea of acronyms (KPP, ASQ:SE, and CSEFEL, to name a few) before I found my way to at least a basic understanding of the way we talk about the resources available to our children.

I have learned about the importance of early and frequent screening (especially for social-emotional health), the partnerships long in place that ensure every child is referred to the appropriate program for their needs, and the desire among parents to have ongoing resources for advice on raising children of every age. But most of all I have learned about the sincere passion that every preschool teacher, program director, and home visitor feels for the children in our community. They are willing to come together at monthly meetings, willing to revisit challenges again and again, and willing to get creative with funding because of the love they feel for the youngest and most vulnerable among us. Each year, they are asked to do more with the same or fewer resources; meanwhile, children still exist beyond the reach of our county's programs and grants.

As you will read in this, our first Issue Brief on one of Hutchinson Community Foundation's leadership areas, the energy and urgency among our early childhood partners is real and ever-present. I am grateful for the ways the Foundation can support them through administering grants, fostering collaboration, and convening, but there is much left to do to ensure all children in Reno County have equal opportunity to succeed.

Sincerely,



Kari Mailloux, Program Officer
Kari@HutchCF.org, 620-663-5293

YOU ARE WELCOME HERE



Some days, Pastor Tim Carey has the pleasure of walking a three-year-old from the bus into Emanuel Lutheran Church and down the hall to the preschool classroom. He might even get a hug before he goes back to his office.

Inside, teacher Bonnie Samuelson asks her students to sit in a circle, where they start the day by singing the "Welcome Song" and going through the calendar.

"If yesterday was Tuesday, what day is today?" Samuelson asks. One child rocks forward and says, "Wednesday." They all watch as she switches the day on the felt and Velcro calendar, and when they get to the day of the month, they all tap their toes as they count up to 29.

There are ten students in this class, ranging from almost three to barely four, and many of them are considered at-risk, whether from developmental delays, low-income households, rural communities, or have parents who are teens, military, or have less than a high school education. Samuelson and her assistant keep much of the learning couched in play, songs, and drawing to keep the kids engaged.

In 2013, Early Education Center (EEC) was filled to capacity and looking for an alternate site for young children who were transitioning from home and daycare settings to preschool in the year they turn three. EEC's nurse attends church at Emanuel Lutheran and mentioned to Pastor Carey that there was a need for additional preschool space.

"When the possibility of the three-year-old preschool program came up I knew it would be a great opportunity for collaboration in a space that during the week is unused or under-used," said Pastor Carey.

The first classroom opened in the fall of 2013 with 40 students, funded in part by the Hutchinson Community Foundation. Now, the preschool has more than 70 students and is funded by the Early Childhood Block Grant, which the Community Foundation received in January 2015, and Emanuel Lutheran Church, whose staff and council has taken a financial stake in the program.

Emanuel has not only opened its building but also has reached out to welcome preschool children and their families. The church hosts an open house before the start of the school year, where church staff and members serve a meal and visit with families. They also host a literacy night and preschool graduation, among other events, that are greatly attended by both families and church members.

"I cannot say enough about how wonderful the staff and congregation has been in our time at Emanuel," Samuelson said. "Pastor Tim usually checks in with us at least a couple times a week to see how things are going and if we need anything. I can't think of a more special place to work and for families to be nurtured by a community organization."

COLLABORATION FOR PROGRESS

Reno County has a strong history of collaboration to meet the needs of children birth to five in our community. Under the leadership of the Hutchinson Community Foundation, an Early Childhood Collaborative was formed in 2002, and, in early 2003, Partnered Agencies for Childhood Excellence (PACE) was developed to create a seamless system of inclusive services to help young children and families in Reno County.

Agency personnel of these programs and services have been working together for the benefit of families with young children ever since. These organizations have collaborated on multiple grants over the last decade, including SMART START, Early Childhood Block Grants, the Kansas Preschool Program, and a United Methodist Health Ministry Fund grant in 2011 that started the Social Emotional Excellence for Kids (SEEK) project.

“The Hutchinson Community Foundation has been a wonderful collaborative partner in helping to see the need for early education addressed in our community, helping to cast the shared vision and taking action steps to make it a reality,” said Pastor Carey.

There are approximately 4,000 children under the age of five in Reno County, yet, according to the 2014 Opportunity Index, only 38.5% of children ages three and four are enrolled in preschool or private nursery school. Programs such as Early Head Start, Head Start, and Parents As Teachers have been working for many years in Reno County to offer early learning opportunities both to at-risk children and families who need some additional support, but they do not have the capacity to reach all of the children in need of their services.

With 20% of Reno County children living in poverty (2014 County Health Rankings), free preschool is a top priority. Together, the current Kansas Preschool Program and Early Childhood Block Grants now account for over 300 free preschool slots for at-risk children. However, our community still faces barriers. The lack of transportation to and from preschool is a hurdle for many working parents, as well as the availability of slots for children in the more rural areas of the county. And with tight budgets, finding quality licensed teachers and personnel is an ongoing challenge.

Even so, Samuelson feels optimistic about Reno County’s progress. “Three-year-olds are now able to get more quality educational experiences than ever before,” she said. “I think that it is especially important to provide programming that is affordable or free. There are quite a few children in our facility that wouldn’t be able to go to school if they had to pay a tuition fee.”

Dr. Marilyn Graham, who coordinates the early childhood grants for the Community Foundation and has worked in education in Reno County for more than forty years, has witnessed the need among our most under-resourced (emotionally, socially, fiscally) families first hand.

“A huge disparity exists in the quantity and quality of words that children from lower income families typically hear in the early years compared to their peers from higher income families and families whose children have experienced a formal early educational experience,” said Dr. Graham. “The average difference of 30 million words that children



Marcia and John Corey established an endowment fund for the Early Education Center with the hope of reaching more children and ensuring that current services will still be available generations from now.



Heather Neuway and her family made a grant from the Mike Neuway Legacy Fund to help expand the new playground at the Early Education Center.

Action Steps

1.

Contact your local, state, and federal representatives to express your support of early childhood initiatives and funding.

2.

Give to the Early Childhood Initiatives Fund at Hutchinson Community Foundation.

3.

Join the Kindergarten Readiness Collective of the United Way.

Early Childhood

Gaps & Challenges

in Reno County

- Transportation to and from preschool
- Preschool slots for children in rural communities
- Recruitment of quality licensed teachers
- Parenting education for birth to five
- Maternal depression screening and support
- Sustainable funding for early learning environments

from the two groups hear before the age of four translates into a disparity in children's vocabulary learning. Too often, the disparity puts children with the noted disadvantage even further behind on their path to school success."

Yet, access to quality preschools can help close the gap when children are part of a community of learners, finding answers through exploration, experimentation, and conversation.

"Children who are three and four years of age learn very naturally through play with friends and interaction with adults who are engaged with them and responsive to them," said KaAnn Graham. "Educational settings that provide these kinds of opportunities to children who are naturally inquisitive and eager to learn are taking advantage of all that we have learned from research into a child's developing brain—that much of what we learn in our lifetimes we learn before the age of five."

Samuelson said programs like hers are even more important today, with increasing demands made on schools. "Children in our program are being exposed to literary concepts such as letters and sounds, math concepts, and basic concepts like colors in a fun way," she said. "This is usually their first experience with 'school,' and it's important for us to make it positive for them and their families."

The collaborative spirit to provide wrap-around services and opportunities for children and their families continues to build in Reno County.

The United Way of Reno County joined the early childhood conversation in 2012 after visiting with the Superintendents of Reno County's six districts, who reiterated the need to better prepare children for kindergarten so that they would have a better chance at long-term success. In response, the United Way launched the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, an early literacy and free book program for every Reno County child, and formed the Kindergarten Readiness Collective, a group consisting of public-private partnerships from early childhood educators, funders, community representatives, and school district leadership, to tackle the issue.

The Community Foundation and United Way have since partnered to support and establish community initiatives. Already, the Collective has collaboratively developed a Kindergarten Entry Skills Checklist for implementation in all six school districts and used the results to develop parent education materials. The group is now working on creating a quarterly parent forum, organizing advocacy activities for local and state public policy, and developing a data collection method for programs to track children and measure collective progress.

"Everything that children experience in the first five years of life relates in some way to their readiness for kindergarten," said KaAnn Graham, as a longtime early childhood leader and advocate for kindergarten readiness. "High quality educational settings that focus on counteracting the impact of stressors such as poverty and abuse are one way of assuring equal opportunities for all children."



The SEEK project, started in 2011 through a grant by the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, developed a framework for partner agencies to screen and refer young children in need of social-emotional services, as well as a collaborative online resource for parents and providers called Reno Parents Connect.

4.

Learn how you can strengthen your business and community through effective investments in children and youth at readynation.org.

5.

Visit RenoParentsConnect.org for local resources.

6.

Contact Hutchinson Community Foundation to tell us how you would like to make a difference in the lives of young children in Reno County.

INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Economists Arthur J. Rolnick and Rob Grunewald state that “investments in human capital prior to kindergarten provide a high public return.” They assert that “the most efficient means to boost the productivity of the workforce 15 to 20 years down the road is to invest in today’s youngest children.”

Furthermore, studies from the Federal Reserve Bank have found that “every dollar invested in quality early care and education saves taxpayers at least \$7 in future costs for reduced grade retention, crime and other public assistance.”

Kansas legislators saw the value of this investment in 1999 when the Kansas Endowment for Youth (KEY) Fund and Children’s Initiatives Fund (CIF) were created as a result of nationwide tobacco litigation and the ensuing settlement, of which \$1.6 billion would come to Kansas over a 25 year period. Overseen by the Kansas Children’s Cabinet, tobacco dollars received by the state go directly to the KEY Fund, which serves as an endowment for the long-term benefit of funding children’s programs. Each year, a transfer is made to the CIF to provide additional funding for programs to benefit the physical and mental health, welfare, safety, and overall well-being of Kansas children.

Hutchinson Community Foundation has received more than \$8.6 million in grants from this fund since 2005. However, according to Kansas Action for Children, “over the first 10 years of state payments under the Master Settlement Agreement, \$137.3 million were diverted away from the KEY Fund to the State General Fund.”

Most recently in early 2015, state policymakers swept \$12 million from the KEY Fund and \$500,000 from the CIF as part of a rescission bill to shore up gaps in the Fiscal Year 2015 budget, which ends June 30. In addition, the budgets for Fiscal Years 2016 and 2017 include sweeps of \$17.3 million from the KEY Fund to the State General Fund.

“Sweeping funds from the CIF and the KEY Fund jeopardizes this essential investment in Kansas’ next generation and will have long-term effects on Reno County by limiting capacity and expansion of some programs and the potential to close others,” said Lisa Gleason, Director of Community Impact and Engagement at the United Way of Reno County.

For Reno County, the transfer of funds may ultimately result in reduced grant funding and fewer program slots for at-risk children. At this time, Reno County does not have the resources to fill the gap this will create.

Until future funding is determined for grants like the Kansas Preschool Program and Early Childhood Block Grant, which combined will bring more than \$1 million to Reno County in 2015, programs will continue to do as much as they can with whatever resources they have, making collaboration all the more important and necessary to make the biggest impact.

“The overriding belief in Reno County is that we want to serve as many children as we can,” said Dr. Marilyn Graham. “Reno County must find ways to make universal early childhood education not just a belief, but a reality.”



GENEROSITY made greater

HutchCF.org

Info@HutchCF.org ◀ 620-663-5293

PO Box 298 ◀ Hutchinson, KS 67504-0298

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED