

Early Childhood and School Readiness:

Creating a Community Where All Children

THRIVE
by
five



Onondaga
**Citizens
League**

2013 Study
Report No. 33

Onondaga Citizens League

MISSION STATEMENT

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Early Childhood and School Readiness:

Creating a Community Where All Children



Acknowledgments

For over 35 years, the Onondaga Citizens League has been an unparalleled vehicle for citizen participation in public affairs in Central New York. Founded in 1978, OCL is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that encourages citizen engagement in public issues. OCL's studies on topics of community-wide importance have culminated in reports that have shone a light on the issues and their impact, helped citizens understand the facts and their significance, and spurred policy-makers and community groups to action.

This report on early childhood and our community's response to the needs of children from birth to school age is no exception. The study began as an exploration of early childhood education, but soon began to focus on the earliest years, which research shows is the optimal time to invest in young children and their families to improve health, well-being and academic outcomes throughout the lifespan. The recommendations in this report, bolstered by the commitment of the County's department of children and families and other community partners, will serve to strengthen the early childhood system's ability to address the issues that will help all children thrive by five and be school ready.

I would like to thank the Study Committee and especially co-chairs Laurie Black and Paul Predmore for their leadership and hard work on the study and report. Many thanks also to study writer Becky Sernett who kept track of Study Committee proceedings and drafted the report, and designer Nancy Boyce who created the report layout and captivating cover design. We are indebted to Theresa Pagano and Partners in Learning, Inc. for the beautiful photographs. OCL office coordinator Colleen Karl-Howe managed the study process from start to finish. We are also grateful to our friends at ProLiteracy, the location of our many study committee meetings.

As always, special thanks are extended to the individual and corporate members who support the work of the Citizens League through their membership fees and donations, and to University College of Syracuse University for its administrative and organizational support of the work of OCL.

Sandra Barrett
Executive Vice President
March 2014



Message from the Study Co-Chairs

As this OCL study was just getting underway, President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union address noted the importance of early childhood education. When the finishing touches were being made to this report, Governor Cuomo’s 2014 State of the State address committed to universal full-day pre-k for every child in New York State. Between these high profile events, rarely did a week go by when we did not see a new pronouncement or learn of a new study on the importance of early childhood development and its profound impact on the overall health of a community, state and country.

As we delved deeper into this topic, the research on the impact of early childhood experiences and brain development was compelling and convincing. Every objective look at the subject came to the same inescapable conclusion: what happens (or, sadly, more often what does not happen) in a child’s first five years of life matters. There is no debate about this fact.

This study posited the overarching question, “How are the children in Onondaga County doing?” Frankly, our community indicators (to the extent they exist) are discouraging. Currently, about half of the children in our community are “kindergarten ready” when they start school. This means almost half of our children are entering school either unprepared or underprepared. This alone should sound an alarm. More children in Onondaga County need to be born healthy, more should receive routine health and wellness screenings, and more need greater interaction with the written and spoken word. In short all of our children should be participating in quality early learning experiences so that when they start kindergarten they are ready to learn.

Although the numbers are higher in certain districts, there are children in *every* school district in our County who are starting school behind. This undeniable reality deserves our focused attention and our strategic action, not simply because it is the compassionate thing to do but also because it is the smart thing to do. Children who enter school unprepared are more likely to underachieve, drop out of school, and need public assistance. If we as a community do not foster an environment where these early years are done right, the consequences for the child, the family and our community are life-long, potentially severe, and costly.

Throughout this study process we have learned about great programs and wonderful people here in Central New York transforming lives of children and their families. We highlight some of these promising practices in this report and we discuss some exciting initiatives being implemented throughout the country. We make recommendations that would strengthen existing programs and suggest new investments in research-based programming.

We feel strongly that our community’s patchwork early childhood system is in need of greater coordination and strategic planning and so we recommend the creation of an early childhood collaborative working together toward a common vision and goals so that all children living in Onondaga County will have a greater chance of entering kindergarten ready to learn.

We conclude this study encouraged by the community volunteers who devoted countless hours together to study this topic. These dedicated stakeholders across the continuum – health, family supports and education – are committed to improving the early childhood outcomes in our community. We have been personally enriched by this study process. We thank everyone who was able to participate and we thank all of you who will be part of the process of carrying the recommendations in this report forward.

We believe there is no more worthy cause than working to ensure that all children have an opportunity for a good start... it has been an honor to co-chair this community effort to envision a more effective system that strives for 100% of our children thriving and entering school to succeed.

Sincerely,
Laurie Black and Paul M. Predmore
Study Co-chairs

“.....
We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.”

–Marian Wright Edelman





Our Vision

We envision a community that encourages and supports the healthy development of children in critical early learning areas including cognitive and social–emotional development, physical well-being, and language and literacy development.

We envision Onondaga County as a community in which all children have access to quality early childhood care and learning experiences, regardless of their income, race, ethnicity, primary spoken language, or developmental challenges.

We envision a community in which 100 percent of its children are ready for kindergarten and graduate from high school.





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Ensuring that all children have access to quality care and learning opportunities during the first five years of life is a mandate gaining momentum in communities nationwide. With this study the Onondaga Citizens League hopes to inspire a commitment from our community to achieve this goal.

Why is early childhood so important? The scientific evidence is clear: By the time a child has turned five, his or her brain has reached 90 percent of its adult, functional capacity, with the fastest period of brain growth occurring in the first year of life. More than three decades of research have shown that children in high-quality early education programs have stronger cognitive abilities, better high school graduation rates, higher math and literacy test scores, and are more likely to attend college than those who do not.² Research has also shown that intervening early in the life of a child facing adverse circumstances – poverty, neglect, social-emotional delays, illness, abuse – is more effective and economical than trying to correct problems later. In short, how well a child is cared for cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically during these early years lays the groundwork for future health, behavior and learning.³

Introduction to Early Childhood: Our Window of Opportunity

Nobel Laureate James Heckman, an expert in the economics of human development, has estimated that investing in high-quality programs in a child’s early years can reduce remedial education and criminal justice system costs, and that for every dollar New York State spends in quality early childhood education, there is a 7 to 10 percent return.⁴ Heckman has also estimated that our state could save \$287 million in annual incarceration costs and “crime-related expenditures” if there were a five percent increase in high school graduation rates for men.⁵

For this reason the first five years of every child’s life represent a critical window of opportunity both for the child and for the community in which that child will one day live as an adult. Thus we must ask: When it comes to our most precious resource, our children, shouldn’t we as a community allocate resources to this time that counts the most? If we do not, we will almost certainly incur increased costs as a consequence. It really is this simple: we can focus on early childhood care and education now or we can address the consequences of failing to do so later. We challenge our community to be proactive, act on the evidence and ensure that all of our children have a healthy start.

How do we do this? Early childhood education experts advise a strategic, comprehensive and whole-child approach that recognizes children’s social-emotional, cognitive and physical needs in the context of their relationships with their caregivers. Many communities have developed very comprehensive approaches that can serve as models. Our state already has an early education plan. The *NYS Early Childhood Plan: Ensuring a Great Start for Every Child*⁶ outlines the key components, objectives and strategies for ensuring that all of our children have access to high-quality care and learning opportunities, and their families are

and ensure that all of our children have a healthy start.

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“.....
A critical time to shape productivity is from birth to age 5, when the brain develops rapidly to build the foundation of cognitive and character skills necessary for success in school, health, career and life. Early childhood education fosters cognitive skills along with attentiveness, motivation, self-control and sociability – the character skills that turn knowledge into know-how and people into productive citizens.¹

–James Heckman
Nobel Laureate and Human Development Economist

receiving the supports they need. This report has been organized to align with the New York State program so that implementation of an early childhood plan at the local level will reflect state systems, resources and strategies.

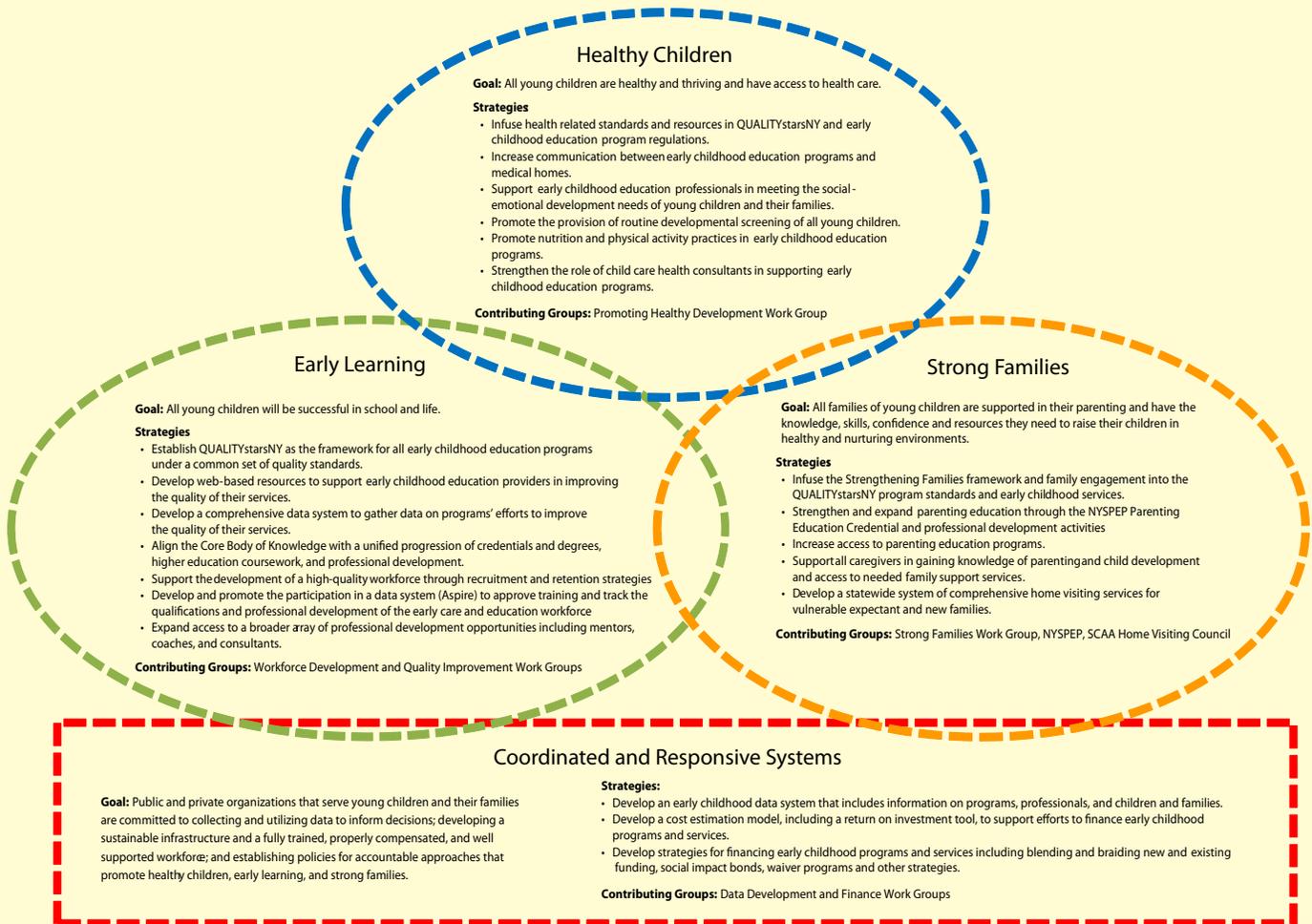
The New York State early education plan has three general themes: Early Learning, Strong Families and Healthy Children. These themes, although addressed separately, are as interconnected in a young child’s life as are his or her rapidly developing neural circuits. Our overarching recommendation for our community’s early education plan, therefore, is that all stakeholders in the health, education, nonprofit, public and private sectors come together to ensure a comprehensive strategy for success.

Onondaga County is fortunate to be rich with family and child programs and supports, many of which are outlined in this report. However, we lack an agreed upon goal and strategy, collaborative action, and methods for tracking and measuring outcomes. Add to that a web of differing funding sources and regulatory mandates, and we have a fragmented system lacking a coherent vision for early childhood learning and care. Our children and our community deserve better. We should join the ranks of communities nationwide that are investing in early care and education and seeing results. This study is a call to take action to help all of our children thrive by developing and implementing a strategy for improving outcomes for children and families.

New York State Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) Strategic Plan

The *New York State Early Childhood Plan: Ensure A Great Start for Every Child* was released in 2009 after years of collaborative work among a 50-member team convened by the State’s Council on Children and Families and the Department of Health. *The Early Childhood Plan* defines the first five years in human development as a critical period and emphasizes the central and important roles played by families and communities in nurturing healthy development. To help families and communities with this, the Plan proposes a comprehensive and integrated system of early-childhood service delivery. This system features four over-arching goals: healthy children, strong families, early learning, and supportive communities. These goals reflect the interconnectedness of the issues involved in positive child and family development.

ECAC GOALS AND STRATEGIES



SCOPE OF STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

Over the course of 2013, the Study Committee convened study sessions in which OCL members, representatives of numerous organizations, and experts in childhood development and early learning met to discuss the issues. Stakeholders included child-care providers, local nonprofits, the Onondaga County Health Department, school districts, educators, service agencies, university researchers, teachers, and other concerned community members.

In the beginning of the study, committee sessions took a broad, question-gathering approach, as study members sought to understand the needs, scope of services and programs in early childhood learning and care in Onondaga County. Next, meetings focused on specific areas, explored in panel presentations. Focus areas included:

- **Local Data and Funding:** 0-5 population and poverty census data; child care supply and need; local statistics on school readiness, literacy, absenteeism, graduation rates; public investments in child care in Onondaga County.
- **Family Supports:** current parenting programs and other family support programs; summer and afterschool programs.
- **Delivery System:** quality and effectiveness indicators; networks and partnerships; priorities.
- **Model Programs and Practices:** summary of national research findings on early childhood education and learning; examples of effective programs from other communities; examples of best practices.

Notes from the meetings can be found online at: <http://onondagacitizensleague.org>. Research also included review of numerous articles and reports and interviews with other stakeholders involved in local social service and educational programs. This report is the culmination of that work, along with the Study Committee's findings and recommendations.

COORDINATED AND RESPONSIVE SYSTEMS

Throughout the study process we learned about many programs that are part of the local early childhood system. However, Study Committee members expressed concerns that the system lacked coordination, gaps exist, and programs often operate in isolation. There is a sense that no one has an eye on “the big picture” of how well the system is serving children and their families.

It is difficult to get a clear understanding of the collective impact of early childhood programs on child well-being. While individual programs collect data and monitor impact, determining the aggregate picture is difficult. For example, how many children in Onondaga County are entering kindergarten ready? How many more four year old slots for pre-kindergarten do we need in the County and what would it cost to provide those services? How many families are currently benefiting from home visitation programs and how many more would benefit? If we had more funding from the state and federal government, where would we want to invest those dollars? Questions like these need to be grappled with at the macro community level and key stakeholders have to be involved in setting priorities for future community investments.

“.....
It is not enough to have available a set of supports and services designed to address the needs of young children and their families. The supports and services need to be easily accessible, coordinated, and effective.

–New York State Early Childhood Plan

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM?

Numerous state and national reports have made the case for collaborative approaches to strategic planning and problem solving in the early childhood system.

One example, the national StriveTogether Network⁷ is based on the following goals focusing on shared responsibility:

1. collaborative action is implemented to ensure existing and new resources are focused on what gets results,
2. time, talent, and treasure in a community is repurposed to focus on work that does get results, and
3. a community as a whole begins to take ownership for education results as opposed to assuming it is the role of a few core institutions

Evidence-based practice is another hallmark of successful improvement efforts. A recent report from the Early Childhood Data Collaborative in Maryland⁸ calls for more collection of data on publicly funded early childhood education (ECE) programs to inform policy and practice. “The ability to link early childhood data is significant because it allows policy makers to understand how children’s collective experiences contribute to their learning and development across ECE programs and over time,” said Carlise King, executive director of the Early Childhood Data Collaborative. “Coordinated longitudinal early childhood data systems can help program administrators reduce duplicative data collection, ECE professionals tailor programs, parents select needed services, and policy makers develop policies to continuously improve ECE programs.”

Although the frameworks vary in the specifics, most models for effective coalitions share several elements:

- Successful coalitions are more than just a group of stakeholders meeting periodically to discuss an issue. Effective coalitions are strategic planning partnerships that bring together the relevant public and private human service agencies to leverage their existing programs and services around a shared community priority.
- Effective collaborations are evidence-based. Their planning and actions are grounded in data that is collected, shared and used as a basis for decision-making, goal-setting, allocation of resources, evaluation of outcomes and continuous improvement over time.

- Successful collaborations are strategic in their purpose: they are concerned with aligning existing services and resources around the desired outcomes, not with the operation or administration of programs.
- The lead partner in successful coalitions is a neutral party with focus on the needs of children, the ability to bring people together and commit to the effort for the long-term, providing focus, staff and resources.
- Partners in the successful collaboration are bound to the shared vision, data-driven decision-making, collaborative action and devotion of resources, with a long-term viewpoint and commitment.

design, implement and coordinate the action plan for kindergarten readiness for Onondaga County. The coalition would be comprised of stakeholders from all levels of the early childhood system – service providers, policy makers, support groups, parents, teachers and caregivers – and would be representative of all the key areas of early childhood development (health, early learning, family supports).

The coalition would be charged with the following tasks:

1. Develop a community-wide definition and appropriate measures of school readiness;
2. Define the barriers to school readiness in the community;
3. Assess current needs and identify gaps in current services and programs;
4. Develop goals and a timeline for achieving those goals;
5. Coordinate and focus community efforts toward the goal of school readiness by promoting active cooperation, communication and collaboration among education agencies and service providers;
6. Develop a dashboard of early childhood indicators that reflect the current outcomes of the early childhood system and report annually;

OVERALL RECOMMENDATION:

An Early Childhood Collaborative for Onondaga County

Recognizing the critical need for partnership and a coordinated strategy to create an integrated local system of early childhood and family support services, the OCL Study Committee recommends the development of a “coordinating council” or a “guiding coalition” on early childhood care and education that would

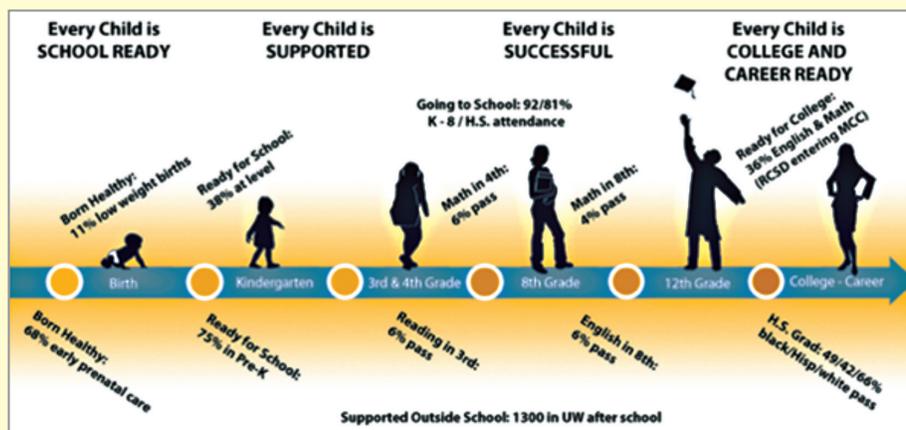
StriveTogether: A Cradle to Career Vision for Education

Rochester and Santa Barbara are two of the communities that use the StriveTogether⁹ framework for collaboration that builds on the unique strengths and needs of an individual community using a shared vision, evidence-based decision making and collaborative action and investment to achieve positive outcomes.

ROC the Future is a community cradle-to-career partnership established by the Rochester School District, Monroe Community College and the United Way of Rochester to achieve better results in education for children in the Rochester School District. The effort is a data-driven framework that calls for evidence-based decision-making and collaborative action to direct community resources toward the shared community vision. The first focus for ROC the Future is third-grade literacy, prioritizing attendance, expanded learning opportunities, and school readiness.

The partnership has developed an extensive set of indicators they will track and work to improve, including ten core and contributing indicators to track school readiness, as indicated below.

In Santa Barbara County, the First 5 Commission served as funder, convener and advocate for strategies to prepare children for kindergarten. However, after several years they recognized they had no consistent data to direct or measure the success of their efforts. With their partners they developed an assessment model – the Kindergarten Student Entrance Profile (KSEP) – that looks at both academic and social-emotional developmental milestones as a way to assess the impact of their program and practices. Using the data to make improvements, the school readiness scores have shown improvement over the past three years.



SOURCE: www.rocthefuture.org

7. Provide information and education to community and all stakeholders about early childhood development issues;
8. Communicate local experiences and perspectives to the NYS Early Childhood Advisory Council to help them develop more effective policies to support children and families;
9. Advocate for appropriate services and funds for school readiness efforts in Onondaga County;
10. Continually re-evaluate goals and make adjustments to mission and efforts as necessary.

Some people have asked how this coalition will be different from other initiatives. It must be a community effort that is data driven and focused on developing a strategic plan for future change. The coalition would develop action plans and hold itself accountable to the public for measuring impact and sharing results. There must be agreed upon metrics that guide the coalition's work and strategic plans with measurable outcomes that will be developed. Examples in this report highlight other communities seeing results through collaborative planning and action and national models that can help point our community in the right direction. **The need is great, the commitment is high and the time is right to do this now.**

The Education Task Force of Syracuse 20/20, a coalition of Central New York business and community leaders, has agreed to partner with the OCL Study Committee to convene stakeholders to develop consensus on the most appropriate and sustainable model for an early childhood coalition for Onondaga County. This stakeholder group will determine the most appropriate organizational structure and the specific objectives of the new collaborative.

Other findings and recommendations of the Study Committee are included in the Early Learning, Strong Families, and Healthy Children sections of the report.

EARLY CHILDHOOD: OUR WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Findings

- Early Childhood is a critical period of time that sets a child on a life-long trajectory. Brain research clearly makes the case that the earlier we intervene to ensure all children have quality early childhood experiences, the better the lifelong outcomes for children.
- While there is very little debate about the importance of early childhood, in Onondaga County we are not currently focused on outcomes and we are not operating in a strategic way that is data driven. There is general agreement on the goal of having all children entering kindergarten ready to learn; however, we have not set up metrics and benchmarks along the way to measure and achieve that goal.
- While we have programs and services in early childhood, they are fragmented and lack a cohesive focus.
- The data to assess quantity, quality and outcomes of specific programs is not readily available so it is difficult to speak to the overall impact that investments early childhood programs are having on the goal of kindergarten readiness.
- Other communities around the state and country are focused on developing a collaborative approach to the early childhood system and Onondaga County needs to become similarly focused on this critical system of care.

Onondaga County Human Services Reorganization: Better Service Delivery for Children and Families

Onondaga County is making sweeping changes in the way it delivers services to families and children, and the reorganization of the county's social services departments promises better coordination of services, and better outcomes for adults, children and families in need of assistance.

After a year of planning, two new departments, the Department of Adult Long Term Care Services and the Department of Children and Family Services, were officially created in January 2014, with other departments reshuffled or eliminated. Deputy County Executive for Human Services Ann Rooney and David Sutkowy, now commissioner of the new Children and Family Services division, emphasize that the move was prompted by a recognition that things could be done better, not a need for budget cuts. Their motivation was to improve responsiveness to clientele, and to give staff the ability to better coordinate, anticipate needs, and move toward a prevention model, rather than a system that reacts to crises. As an example, in planning for the reorganization they realized that 75% of the youth in the Hillbrook juvenile justice center were previously involved in the child protective system as victims. With the new coordinated system, the plan is to work with the children and families longer to improve the children's chances of a better future.



EVIDENCE SUPPORTS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Many studies, including an analysis of research on early childhood education conducted as part of the U.S. Department of Education’s efforts to improve the quality of education,¹⁰ have found that preschool graduates have more positive quality of life outcomes, including greater academic motivation and behavior, better high school graduation and GED rates, higher employment rates and better earnings, fewer arrests and antisocial acts and generally better self-esteem and locus of control.

Early Learning

One of the most well-known and longest-running studies supporting early childhood education is the Abecedarian (A-B-C-D) Project. Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill studied the benefits of early childhood education for poor children in North Carolina, following them from infancy through age 30. The study began in 1972 with 111 infants living in low-income households. Half of the children (the intervention group) were enrolled in quality early childhood education programs (from infancy through age 5), and the other half (the control group) received whatever care their parents or caregivers could provide.

“While parents remain children’s earliest and most important teachers, the significance of early care and education services—including both center-based and family-based child care, Head Start/Early Head Start programs, pre-school programs, libraries and other settings—continues to grow as parents of young children spend more time in the workforce. There is abundant research that shows that early care and education has both short- and long-term benefits for children.

—New York State Early Childhood Plan

The intervention group participated in programs that offered individualized educational activities, focused on play and emphasizing social, emotional and cognitive areas, with language development given high priority.

The project reported its major findings as:¹¹

- children in the early intervention program scored higher in cognitive tests from 2 and 3 years of age through age 21;
- reading and math achievements were higher for the intervention group;
- the intervention children were four times more likely to attend college;
- on average, the intervention children waited longer to have their first children than the control group; and
- mothers of children in the intervention group (especially teen mothers) achieved higher employment and educational goals than mothers in the control group.

Another research study often cited by early education experts is the HighScope Perry Preschool Study¹² that examined 123 children born in poverty through the age of 40 in 2005. From 1962–1967, children aged 3 and 4 were randomly divided into a group that participated in HighScope’s preschool program and a control group that received no programming. Based on interviews with 97% of the participants still living at age 40 and additional data gathered from schools, social services, and arrest records, the study found that participants in the preschool program had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have preschool programming.

A 2001 cost-benefit analysis of the federally funded Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) Program¹³ found that, “(w)ith an average cost per child of \$6,730 (1998 dollars) for 1.5 years of participation, the preschool program generated a total return to society at large of \$47,759 per participant. The largest benefit was program participants’ increased earnings capacity projected from higher educational attainment. Overall, \$7.10 dollars were returned to society at large for every dollar invested in preschool. Excluding benefits to participants,

the ratio of program benefits to costs for the general public was \$3.83 for every dollar invested. The ratio of benefits to costs for government savings alone was \$2.88 per dollar invested.

These and other studies are part of a growing body of knowledge supporting investment in early childhood education.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

The Importance of Social Interaction

Brain development in infants depends on social interactions with others, particularly their primary caregivers. Children need routine opportunities to play, engage, experiment, explore, make mistakes, succeed, test boundaries, and learn language. Reliable and nurturing relationships with adults are essential, not only because 90 percent of brain development occurs during early childhood, but 85 percent of a child's intellect, skills and personality is cultivated from birth to age five.¹⁴

Caregivers and environments have incredible and significant impact during this period. "For young children," said Desalyn De-Souza, an assistant professor in Community and Human Services/Human Development at SUNY Empire State College, "development occurs in the context of relationships." These are the relationships with parents, teachers, siblings, babysitters, grandparents, neighbors – anyone who regularly comes in contact with the young child.

How caregivers interact (or don't) with children not only affects the development of children's neural circuits, but also their

social-emotional growth. By age three, De-Souza said, children are well on their way to developing a sense of trust with the caregiver so that he or she can feel safe to explore his or her world; the ability to self-regulate his or her emotions (self-soothe); a sense of self (autonomy and independence); and an understanding of social rules and empathy. These are the social-emotional abilities that characterize healthy, developing children and are important for school readiness and later learning.

Play is an important part of the relationship between child and caregiver. Children play with their hands, make sounds, use their mouths, and explore their world by touch – all of this is essential to their development, said professor De-Souza. "It's not [about] the toy," she said. "That's just the tool that they use to engage in the relationship."

Play also helps the child develop an understanding of his or her world that can't be learned through rote instruction, because it is based on a subjective and unique experience. Play is often improvisational and experimental. It encourages development based on the child's interactions, his or her behaviors and then the resulting actions of the caregiver. The child experiences the touch of the ball rolled to him or her, the smile on the teacher's face, the sound of his or her own laughter, the safety of the exchange, what it feels like to push it back, how hard he or she has to roll it to get to the teacher, what happens if the ball misses, what happens if it bumps on his or her knee and bops him on the nose. These playful interactions offer limitless learning opportunities.

Ensuring High Quality Care and Learning

The quality of early childhood programs influences the benefits, particularly for children who live in poverty. Definitions of quality differ, but usually include highly qualified teachers, developmentally and age appropriate activities, and enriching interaction between staff and children. Research has shown that investing early in high-quality programs for children in low-income families can triple the cost-benefit, in terms of money saved in later special education, social welfare, and criminal justice program costs.²²

If all children deserve high-quality care, how do we, as a community, establish what high-quality care means, evaluate programs, and help providers improve their services? A pilot program has been in place for the past several years in Onondaga County and six other communities in New York State, but unfortunately funding will run out in 2014.

QualityStarsNY (QSNY) is based on national models of the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for early childhood programs, which evaluates early care programs on criteria: learning environment; family engagement; teachers' qualifications and experience; and leadership and management. The common standards are tailored to center-, home- and public school-based programs. Providers voluntarily participate in the evaluations and are then provided with resources, training and support to improve their quality of care and/or maintain their high ratings. Programs are held accountable for how they use the financial assistance they receive, and are reassessed on a regular basis.

In Central New York, Child Care Solutions assisted with implementation of QSNY; 40 providers voluntarily participated, receiving training and assistance as needed. The pilot was intended to create an easily-recognizable five-star rating system to help families make better-informed decisions for their children, said Peggy Liuzzi, recently retired executive director of Child Care Solutions.

QRIS is being implemented in many states nationwide, and some states have even used the QRIS to encourage families' participation in higher quality programs. In Maine and Louisiana, parents receive a larger tax credit if they are using a higher-rated childcare program. "It's a huge policy lever," Liuzzi said.

In its Early Childhood Plan, New York State recommends implementing the QRIS statewide. As it is now, however, no funding exists for such initiative.

Effect of Neglect and Toxic Stress on Early Childhood Development

Children who live with “toxic stress” are at a disadvantage in terms of overall development in their early years and school readiness, as well as in dealing with later life challenges. Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child defines toxic stress as: “when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity – such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship – without adequate adult support.”¹⁵

Children who develop under such constant stress have increased risks “for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years.”¹⁶ Research has shown that children who experience routine adversity are more likely to be developmentally delayed, have chronic health problems, such as heart disease and diabetes, and be at risk for substance abuse and depression.

The Center on the Developing Child also emphasizes that “significant neglect – the ongoing disruption or significant absence of caregiver responsiveness – can cause more harm to a young child’s development than overt physical abuse, including subsequent cognitive delays, impairments in executive functioning, and disruptions of the body’s stress response.”¹⁷

Many children in Onondaga County may be living in toxic stress environments, particularly where poverty rates are high and the adults who care for children may not have the resources and supports they need. The good news is that early intervention by supportive and caring adults can repair and/or prevent the damages of toxic stress.¹⁸

Vocabulary and Early Literacy

Gestures in play, in the interactions with caregivers, pave the way for children to speak early sentences, Empire State College’s De-Souza said. Consider this: A child points to a cookie on the counter. The adult says, “Do you want to eat a cookie?” This will then lead the child to string a few words together, so that with the pointing, he or she will eventually say, “Eat cookie.” And this will then become a complete sentence.

However, if the caregiver doesn’t use speech to teach the child language, De-Souza said that children will just fill the “void” with gestures. “But if they do have a model, the gestures help to advance the language that is present.”

“If you haven’t heard the words,” said Nancy Jenner Gabriel, professor of human services and teacher education at Onondaga Community College, “you can’t speak or understand the words.” The number of words a child knows is a good indicator of reading comprehension.

The socio-economic status of a family has been shown to have an association with the number of words a child learns. The “30 million word gap by age three” was identified by researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risely after they recorded and analyzed more than 1,300 conversations between children and their parents. In 2003, they published their findings in “The Early Catastrophe”¹⁹ in *Education Review*. The researchers found while

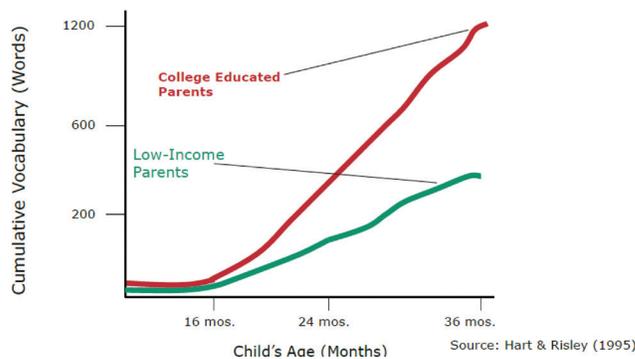
all families played, nurtured and talked with their children, the families of lower-economic incomes used fewer words, and, hence, their children learned fewer words, and learned words more slowly.

“Simply in words heard,” the article said, “the average child on welfare was having half as much experience per hour (616 words per hour) as the average working-class child (1,251 words per hour) and less than one-third that of the average child in a professional family (2,153 words per hour).”²⁰

Public libraries are an often overlooked partner in early childhood education and literacy. Baby and toddler story times offered through public libraries, either on-site or at a child care setting, provide valuable experiences in language development. Onondaga County’s Central Library also offers Kits for Kids, child-sized backpacks complete with a book, a puppet, plush toy, a CD or other related material; and an activity card with ideas for bringing the story to life and building literacy skills. The kits were designed to help parents, teachers, and childcare providers develop the early literacy skills necessary for children to be ready to read once they begin school. Recognizing the importance of a strong early literacy program, the State Library is developing a coordinated statewide early literacy training plan for library staff throughout New York State and statewide adoption of an Every Child Ready to Read program giving libraries more access to early childhood resources.²¹



Vocabulary Development by Parent’s Economic Status



THE EARLY LEARNING LANDSCAPE IN ONONDAGA COUNTY

Early Childhood Indicators

As a community, we need benchmarks to measure how well our early childhood system is meeting the needs of all children. If our goal is for every child in Onondaga County to be ready for kindergarten and prepared to succeed in school, we need gauges and benchmarks to assess the current physical, cognitive and emotional health of our children and the strength of our support system, and to measure community progress toward meeting our goals. Currently, our community efforts are not data-driven and we do not have agreed upon indicators that policy makers and community members are tracking as a means to chart our progress.

Imagination Library – Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County

Imagination Library mails age-appropriate books monthly to children from birth to age 5 in over 1,000 communities across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The goal is to foster the early literacy skills children need to succeed in kindergarten and on up the educational ladder. Research clearly shows that parental book reading to children during the preschool years is linked to language and school readiness child outcomes. Recent research from Shelby County, Tennessee’s Imagination Library program, Books from Birth, has demonstrated that the Imagination Library program has a positive impact on participants’ kindergarten readiness scores, regardless of income.

The Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County operates the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program in Syracuse, launched on the North Side of Syracuse in May 2010 and expanded to the Near Westside in August 2012. Today, all children under age 5 in the Syracuse zip codes of 13203, 13208 or 13204 (approximately half of the City’s 0 – 5 population) are eligible to receive Imagination Library books, at no cost to the family and regardless of income – one book per month from birth until their fifth birthday. The local community is responsible for the shipping and handling costs for each book, approximately \$2.08. The Dollywood Foundation covers the cost of purchasing the book.

The program currently serves 1,730 children in the three city zip codes, 35.3% of the eligible children. In its first 3½ years the program in Syracuse has distributed over 46,000 books to 3,493 children. Over 40 partners assist in the enrollment process, with St. Joseph Hospital and Onondaga County departments providing the majority of the referrals.

Professors Frank Ridzi, Monica R. Sylvia, and Sunita Singh of Le Moyne’s College’s Center for Urban and Regional Applied Research are evaluating the impact of Imagination Library in Syracuse. Preliminary findings show that the increased access to books was associated with more frequent child-directed reading and discussion of the story. These results persisted when controlling for the effects of child age, gender, family income, parental education, race, parental nation of birth, and primary language. The research is ongoing, with the first cohort of children in the program entering kindergarten in 2015.

Syracuse has also been named as a Pacesetter Community for the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County’s work as lead for the Annie E. Casey-led Campaign for Grade Level Reading, a collaborative effort of funders, nonprofit partners, states and communities across the nation to ensure that many more children from low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career and active citizenship. It provides a framework for communities to embrace kindergarten readiness on the path toward all children reading at grade level by the end of third grade, a key predictor of high school graduation and a milestone missed by fully 80 percent of low-income children.

Examples of indicators that could be refined and collected as part of a collaborative strategy include:

- Percent of births to mothers who received prenatal care during the first trimester;
- Percent of babies born in Onondaga County weighing less than 5.5 pounds;
- Percent of births to adolescents (women aged 15 to 19 years of age);
- Percent of children who have had the recommended number of well-child visits at specific ages;
- Percent of 3 & 4 years olds enrolled in an early education program;
- Kindergarten readiness scores; and
- Third-grade reading scores.

However, indicators and data are needed for the critical periods between infancy and three years of age – a time when developmental needs are best identified and addressed.

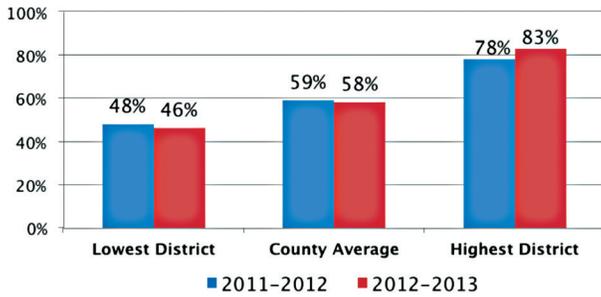
Assessing Kindergarten Readiness

How well do we currently prepare our children for kindergarten in Onondaga County?

This is “a difficult question to answer,” said Jeff Craig, assistant superintendent for instructional support at OCM-BOCES. The problem is districts use different kindergarten assessment methods, which measure different skills and result in different data, he said. Most of these screenings are used to assist with placement and to establish baselines for student progress and teacher assessment, and none are holistic in their approach to students’ progress and learning.

The only available data that compares “apples to apples” is the AIMSweb Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) assessment. Of the 18 school districts in Onondaga County, 14 use AIMSweb LNF to assess kindergarteners in September. AIMSweb LNF requires students to identify 13 letter names correctly within a one-minute period. It has been a predictor of phonics learning and reading fluency. Students who score above the 35th percentile are considered “kindergarten ready.” According to OCM-BOCES data collected from the 14 districts in September 2012, 58 percent of the County’s kindergarteners were considered “ready.” In the highest reporting school district, 83 percent of kindergarteners were “ready,” and in the lowest reporting district, 46 percent were “ready.”

**AIMSweb Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) Scores
% of Students Scoring in 35th Percentile or Higher in
14 Onondaga County School Districts**



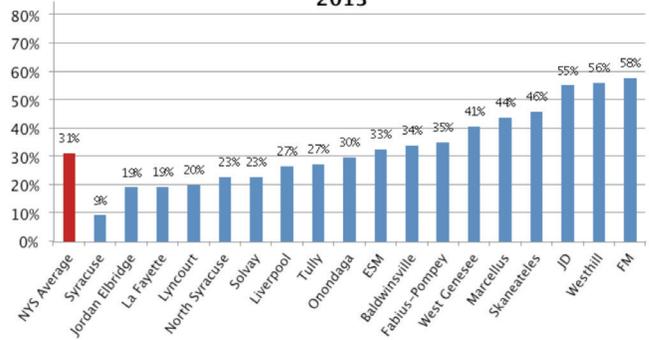
These data are from the AIMSweb Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) assessment given in the early fall to kindergarten students in 14 of the 18 school districts in Onondaga County. It is important to note that not all of the participating districts remain consistent from year to year. Nonetheless, this is the most widely used measure available at this time

AIMSweb focuses solely on language development, which leaves the other key components of early learning (social-emotional development, physical well-being and motor development, cognition and general knowledge, and how children approach learning) unmeasured.

The only other data available to measure students across districts are annual mathematics and English Language Arts Assessments in grades 3-8. The NYS Office of Early Learning, however, does support a universal assessment, Craig said, and according to the office's Web page, it is tasked with ensuring the development of "a comprehensive assessment protocol and data system for Preschool-Grade 3, including the addition of an early childhood

component to the NYS Education Department's public report cards for districts and schools."²⁶

**Percent 3rd Graders Meeting the ELA State Standard
2013**



Kindergarten assessment was one of the initiatives outlined in the state education department's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge proposal submitted to the federal government late last year.²⁷ Unfortunately, the state did not win the grant, and there is no movement on the initiative. The proposal included development of an Early Learning Inventory of Skills, which would be given to all children entering kindergarten. This tool would assess the strengths and gaps in children's development on a broader scale – emphasizing the five key components to early childhood development – to create a baseline for individual students and help teachers determine where to focus their lesson plans.

Maryland was one of the first states to initiate statewide kindergarten assessments, and it has used the data from the evaluations to determine how to improve its early childhood education programs. Over the past 10 years, the state has seen significant

What Do We Mean By "School Readiness"?

Children are born ready to learn and begin learning at birth, through interactions with their environment and everyday experiences. Research tells us that children learn best through interactions with people they trust and when learning is fun.

The Urban Child Institute has this to say about fostering readiness for kindergarten:

"There is much more to being 'ready for kindergarten' than being physically healthy and fostering cognitive development like being able to count to 20 or knowing some of the letters of the alphabet. School readiness is more relevant to characteristics such as: listening and asking questions, expressing thoughts and communication with others, thinking before performing actions, possessing curious eagerness to learn, being experienced with books, knowing how to share and take turns, being able to work alone and with others, and understanding written words and how they are put together to make a sentence".²³

Measuring school readiness, then, requires more than a simple test. Some states and communities use assessment practices requiring multiple observations by trained teachers to assess a child's skills, knowledge and behaviors. In Maryland, for instance, kindergarten teachers statewide use the Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR) throughout kindergarten to help assess children's learning needs, styles and progress. Pre-K and Head Start teachers also use the model to help teachers, families and caregivers prepare children to enter school ready to learn.²⁴

Teachers in Chemung County, which has a School Readiness Program, use two instruments to measure cognitive and non-cognitive areas: the Child Observation Record (COR) measures Initiative, Language and Literature, Movement and Music and Science, while the Child Rating Scale (TCRS) captures indicators of school readiness in Task Orientation, Behavior Control, Assertiveness, and Peer Social Skills Experiences.²⁵

By using a common measurement tool, teachers across school districts have been able to evaluate various early childhood education approaches and document improvements in learning.

gains in students' development. According to the 2012-2013 state report, 82 percent of kindergarteners are entering Maryland's schools "fully school ready" compared to 49 percent in 2001-2002.²⁸ The Maryland assessments have also helped encourage more public funding for universal pre-k and all-day kindergarten programs, as children in these programs have scored higher in the assessments.

While most assessment programs use the language "school readiness" or "screening," it should be noted that no eligible-age child is screened out or turned away from kindergarten in New York State. When schools evaluate children before the kindergarten year begins, it is to determine classroom placement and intervention needs. All of those children will be coming to the school, Craig said. Only a parent or legal guardian can opt a child out of attending kindergarten (which is not mandated by law); a school cannot turn a child away.

Early Childhood Programs

Early childhood programs in Onondaga County represent a "patchwork of care" for working families, said Peggy Liuzzi, former executive director of Child Care Solutions, which helps parents, families and children in the County navigate this "complex delivery system" by offering free child care referral services. "Families want care for kids that include educational opportunities," she said, and they find many difficulties getting the care they need.

Early learning environments can include: family child care homes and centers, preschools, Early Head Start/Head Start programs, and school district pre-k programs, which are free and open to all 4-year olds in the districts. Many are part-time and some may have waiting lists. There are also early childhood programs that collaborate, blending funding and sharing resources to better meet the needs of the children and parents.

Programs are offered part-time and full-time and traditionally operate during the school day and school year, but parents work year-round and, sometimes, in rotating shifts. As a result, children are sometimes in multiple programs. Full-time childcare designed to meet the needs of working parents can be very

expensive. "Most parents pay out-of-pocket," Liuzzi said. Parents can get a tax credit, but it pays only a fraction of the cost. Some low-income parents are eligible for child care subsidies, she said, but if parents start to earn more money, they may no longer qualify for the subsidy program.

Programs that serve children with special needs (see Children with Special Needs, p. 15), are funded regardless of family income. Other programs such as federally-funded Head Start are free to eligible families and may have waiting lists.

Programs such as those at The Salvation Army collaborate with the SCSD to offer universal pre-k within its child care classrooms to provide a seamless setting for children and parents. The Salvation Army classrooms have students whose tuitions come from multiple funding sources (Head Start, universal pre-k, childcare subsidies, private tuition), but are served together in one classroom. With the collaboration, the Salvation Army has to keep track of the multiple requirements and standards that come with different programs' funding sources, but it allows the Salvation Army to be a "one-stop-shop for parents," said Chandra Smith, Director of Child Day Care Services. Without such creative funding measures, The Salvation Army day care programs couldn't afford to employ high-level (master's degree) staff and offer such cohesive services to families.

Types of Childcare and Early Education Programs in Onondaga County

Child Care Solutions provides a report on child care supply, estimated demand, and cost in Onondaga and Cayuga counties in "A Snap Shot of Child Care in CNY: 2013," <http://childcaresolutionscny.org>. Many children from birth to age 5 are at home with a parent, family member or other caregiver, either full-time or part-time. Child Care Solutions estimates that in Onondaga County, 62% of children birth through age four, or nearly 17,000 children, are likely to need care, based upon the number of available parents in the workforce. For those families whose young children are not able to be at home full-time, there are many different care options.

School Readiness Project – Chemung County

The Chemung County School Readiness Project (SRP) was launched in 2006 to significantly increase the percentage of children who enter kindergarten in Chemung prepared to learn and function successfully in school. Through grassroots, county-wide collaboration, organizers of the SRP aimed to create a comprehensive and coordinated array of services to meet the needs of children ages zero to five and their families. All activities associated with the SRP fall into four core service areas: early care and education; parent learning; healthcare; and home visiting. The key indicator of program impact is the readiness level of children entering kindergarten in the school districts of Elmira, Elmira Heights, and Horseheads.

Through the efforts of SRP's Early Care and Education work group, all public elementary schools in Chemung County now use the same instrument for screening the readiness of incoming kindergartners. Thanks to the use of this uniform screening tool, education and early childhood leaders can evaluate school readiness based on common indicators and assessment criteria. With this improvement in data tracking, early care and education leaders are better able to pinpoint those early childhood services that have the best potential for helping young children build the foundation they need to start school as able learners. The percent of students who were school ready at kindergarten entrance rose from 47.5 percent in 2007 to 68.6 percent in 2011.

- **Child Care Centers** provide care for children aged 6 weeks to 12 years in a non-residential facility to more than six children at a time. All centers must be licensed by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. There are 64 licensed child care centers in Onondaga County.
- **Family Daycare Homes** provide care for three to six children at a time in a residence; may add one or two school-age children. The maximum allowable number of children will depend on whether there are infants and how many are in their care. Homes can enroll children aged 6 weeks to 12 years. Family daycare homes must be licensed by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. There are 233 licensed Family Day Care Homes in Onondaga County.
- **Group Family Daycare Homes** provide care for seven to twelve children at a time in a residence; may add one or two school-age children. The maximum allowable number of children will depend on whether there are infants and how many are in their care. A provider must use an assistant when more than six children are present. Homes can enroll children aged 6 weeks to 12 years, and they must be licensed by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. There are 119 licensed Group Family Child Care Homes in Onondaga County.
- **Head Start/Early Head Start** – P.E.A.C.E. Inc. provides Head Start/Early Head Start at 15 sites for 1,044 children and pregnant women in low-income families in Onondaga County every year. With more than 200 staff, these programs are among the largest in the state. Participating families meet income eligibility guidelines and programs are offered at no cost to them. Early Head Start helps children from birth to three years of age, and pregnant women; 214 slots are available in Onondaga County in both half-day and all-day programs. Head Start, which assists children from 3 to 5 years of age, has 840 available slots. Services are offered in a variety of formats, including center-based full-day and half-day programs, collaborations with daycare centers, home-based programs, and a special locally designed model at Jamesville Correctional Facility. About 400 children in Head Start attend a half-day program. Another 400 participate in full-day center-based programs; 163 of these are also UPK students. Twenty-two children participate in home-based Head Start, and 75 pregnant women and children participate in Early Head Start home-based. The day care collaboration options provide early education and services for 88 Head Start and 39 Early Head Start children. Twelve families participate in a locally designed option with the Children’s Consortium and the Jamesville Correctional program serves 24 families.
- **Public Pre-Kindergartens** – Seven school districts in Onondaga County currently offer universal pre-k programs, which are available at no cost to any child living in that district. Most pre-k programs are partial day programs usually located in public schools, but many are located in private schools or day care centers; ages of children vary depending on the program. Pre-k programs are supervised by the State Education Department (SED).

- **Nursery Schools** provide care for children aged 2 to 5 years old for three hours a day or less. A nursery school may voluntarily register with the SED.
- **Legally Exempt Care (Informal)** provides care for one to two children at a time in addition to the provider’s children, usually in the provider’s home; are not required to register.

(For a more in-depth description of Early Education and Care in New York State, go to <http://onondagacitizensleague.org>, 2013 Study Resources.)

Profile of Onondaga County: Children Under Age Five				
Year	Total Population of <5 Years	% Change	% of Total Population	% Families with children <5 living below federal poverty level 2009-2011
Total Population of Children Under 5 Years in Onondaga County				
2000	29,917	N/A	6.5%	18%
2010	27,378	-8.5%	5.9%	
Total Population of Children Under 5 Years for City of Syracuse				
2000	10,209	N/A	6.9%	36.9%
2010	10,217	0.1%	7.0%	

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Children Living in Poverty

Most communities have children living in poverty. About 30 percent of families in the city of Syracuse are living in poverty, according to data collected from the Onondaga County Department of Social Services. Nearly 80 percent of Syracuse City School District students receive free or reduced lunch, another indicator of poverty. Poverty is an issue in almost every school district that lies in whole or in part in Onondaga County.

School District	Free or Reduced Cost Lunch	School District	Free or Reduced Cost Lunch
Baldwinsville	22.3%	Marcellus	12.9%
East Syracuse-Minoa	33.5%	North Syracuse	28.3%
Fabius – Pompey	23.6%	Onondaga	34.4%
Fayetteville-Manlius	8.3%	Skaneateles	8.6%
Jamesville-Dewitt	13.2%	Solvay Free Union	46.5%
Jordan-Elbridge	40.2%	Syracuse City	79.8%
Lafayette	35.3%	Tully	37.1%
Liverpool	28.8%	West Genesee	18.3%
Lyncourt	51.4%	Westhill	6.6%

Source: NYS Report Cards, 2011-2012

UNIVERSAL PRE-KINDERGARTEN

New York State has a long-standing commitment to early childhood education. As early as 1966, the State’s “Experimental Pre-Kindergarten” program allocated resources for low-income children to enroll in pre-k classes. In 1997, the modern “Universal Pre-Kindergarten” program was launched; 449 school districts now offer pre-k to nearly 100,000 children through the program. Last year, Governor Cuomo launched the State’s first program dedicated to providing full-day pre-kindergarten to

children in our highest-needs communities. More than 5,500 children statewide are expected to enroll in full-day pre-k for the first time in 2014 as a result of this funding. To fulfill the State’s goal of true “Universal Pre-Kindergarten” access for all children, the Governor included \$100 million in his 2014-15 State budget proposal.²⁹

The chart below reflects attendance in some form of pre-school program for three and four year olds in Onondaga County. In school districts where public pre-k is not available, families choose from a number of options.

School District – Onondaga County	% of 3 & 4 Year Olds in Pre-K	School District – Onondaga County	% of 3 & 4 Year Olds in Pre-K
Westhill	70.4%	Syracuse City*	52.2%
Baldwinsville	66.7%	Tully	51.5%
Fayetteville-Manlius	64.9%	N. Syracuse*	51.4%
Skaneateles	61.9%	Lyncourt*	50.7%
West Genesee	59.9%	Fabius Pompey	46.0%
Marcellus	59.5%	Solvay*	45.3%
Jamesville-Dewitt	57.0%	Jordan-Elbridge*	30.2%
E. Syracuse Minoa*	56.3%	LaFayette*	22.4%
Liverpool	53.7%	Onondaga	9.2%

*Publicly funded Universal Pre-K available.
Source: American Community Survey

Syracuse City School District Early Childhood Programs serve more than 1,600 students according to director Marie Perkins. In addition to universal pre-k, programs include inclusion, early intervention and an early childhood evaluation center. Partial- and full-day programs are available.

2012-2013 Participation Levels in Syracuse’s Universal Pre-K

SCSD UPK	4 year olds	3 year olds
SCSD Full Day	588	3
Agency Full Day	182	0
SCSD Half Day	247	160
Agency Half Day	283	0
Total	1,300	163

The SCSD would like to “expand full day to as many kids as possible,” Perkins said, but resources are limited. The district is collaborating more with community providers, and at the same time is integrating school-based programs into the full school setting as much as possible. A new centralized registration center allows for better coordination of communication to parents about what early childhood education opportunities are available. The district bases its registration decisions on need, not a first-come, first-serve policy.

The district also works to develop relationships with families to keep parents as involved as possible in their child’s early education. In a recent survey of parents, the SCSD learned that lack of transportation and insufficient numbers of full-day pre-k slots kept some parents from registering their children in a pre-k program with the district.

According to Perkins, 73% of the students who graduate from the SCSD’s pre-k programs are ready for school. “Kids are

making progress,” she said. The district is working on collecting more data and also to educate people who can advocate for early childhood education so the district can obtain more funding.

Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test

2012 Report	Alphabet Knowledge	Concepts of Print	Oral Language	Comp of Written Text	Phonological Awareness
SCSD Full Day	73.8%	81.4%	83%	80.5%	59.2%
SCSD Half Day	53.3%	58.4%	65.2%	57.2%	35.3%
Agency UPK	44.6%	52.1%	59.8%	52.8%	31%

The East Syracuse-Minoa (ESM) Central School District is notable because it has pre-k programs for children aged 1 through 4, the only school district that starts school-based program at age one. These pre-k programs start early with children and families and focus on providing parents with support related to age-appropriate child development. One-year olds attend with a parent once each week for 90 minutes, for group and individual play and a parent program. Similarly, two-year olds meet once a week for a two-hour session, where a parent spends time playing with the child and participating in a parent discussion group on child development and parenting. Three-year olds meet twice each week and parents attend a parent group every other week. Involvement of the parent helps bridge the relationship between home and school, and ensure continuity of age appropriate activities. There are a limited number of slots, and waiting lists for the programs for one- to three-year olds. At the 4-year-old level, pre-k is universal and transportation is provided. Teachers and teaching assistants in each classroom focus on further cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of each child, and invite parents to participate. District Superintendent Donna DeSiato notes that parents are the most important teachers of their children, and early education and parent involvement have an important positive effect on a child’s school performance.

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Early intervention is critical for children with special needs. The New York State Early Intervention Program (both state and federally mandated) provides evaluations and services for children birth to age three with diagnosed conditions or developmental delays at no cost to families. Children suspected of having a delay or disability can be referred to the program, administered by the Onondaga County Health Department, by anyone – parents, health care and social services professional, or other family members or community agencies.

The Mid-State Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC) serves as a source of information, referral and support to families and professionals caring for children with special education needs, from birth to age five. It supports matching a child’s needs with available services, offers trainings, provides mentoring and promotes positive outcomes. ECDC’s services are free to families and providers within the following areas: Cayuga-

Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse

A local champion of universal pre-k in Syracuse has been the **Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse (ACTS)**. The ACTS Public Education Task Force, co-chaired by Study Committee member Peter Knoblock, began its work in November 2011 with the goal of quality full-day pre-k classrooms for all four-year-olds in the city. ACTS notes that each year more than 500 children enter school without having a pre-kindergarten experience. Working in collaboration with the Syracuse City School District, Onondaga County, and Say Yes to Education, ACTS has helped to increase the number of full day classrooms in Syracuse. ACTS continues to advocate for more quality full day classrooms.

Onondaga BOCES; Onondaga-Cortland-Madison-BOCES; Syracuse City; Oswego BOCES; and Tompkins-Seneca-Tioga-BOCES. The ECDC is located at Syracuse University, in its Center on Human Policy, and funded by the New York State Education Department Office of Special Education, part of a statewide network of 14 Early Childhood Direction Centers.

In addition to these resources, each school district participates in the Preschool Special Education Program, which is a federal and state entitlement program that provides therapeutic and educational services for children ages three and four with developmental delays. Eligibility determination is based on state regulations and is determined by an evaluation provided through the school districts' preschool special education committees, which direct parents to approved evaluation centers. Educational services can include speech, physical, occupational and other therapies, special education teachers and classroom programs.

Another local organization assisting families is the Central New York Coalition for Young Children with Special Needs. The coalition, an organization of approved Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education agencies, provides information, promotes training for parents and professionals, monitors regulations that impact service delivery, and collaborates with local and state agencies to meet community needs. Tracey Menapace, director of the ECDC, coordinates the activities of the coalition. Syracuse University was an early leader and proponent of inclusive education, and so this region has benefitted with regard to early childhood education and services.

EARLY LEARNING

Findings

- Research shows that quality early learning and care can influence children's later life outcomes and prevent the need for remediation and other social services in the future.
- Children's relationships and interactions with primary caregivers are central to social-emotional development, language development and early learning.
- Children living in toxic stress environments – neglect, physical or emotional abuse, exposure to violence, the hardships of poverty – are more likely to suffer development delays and health problems over their lifetimes.
- Disparate child care funding systems create a barrier to provision of cohesive, quality care, and limited funding restricts access to publicly funded pre-k.

Recommendations

- Advocate for State and County funding for the continuation and expansion of the QualityStars NY Quality Rating & Improvement system to improve the quality of early care and learning programs and insure that County childcare subsidies are wisely invested.
- Develop a funding strategy for investing in affordable and accessible professional development for child care providers in the County focusing on early child development, best-practices and the Common Core early learning standards.
- The SCSD, Child Care Solutions and the County should develop a model for reaching parents and more informal child care providers to make sure that early child development and learning standards are well understood.
- Support state and local calls for full-day Universal Pre-K for all low-income families in the County.
- Support expansion of the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County's Imagination Library Program.
- Develop a universal kindergarten readiness measure that identifies the skills children need to be ready for school and that serves as a barometer for measuring how the early childhood system and community are doing in preparing students for school.
- Expand Early Head Start and other high quality infant and child care programs that work with children and families in the earliest years.
- Develop stronger relationships between families and other care providers and our local public libraries, which provide services and materials free of charge to all County residents.



THE CORNERSTONE OF HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Supportive families are clearly the critical element in creating positive outcomes in early learning and childhood health. Providing parents with the needed infrastructure and supports not only benefits developing children, but also the communities in which they live. An estimated 30 percent of families in Onondaga County live in poverty, and nearly 80 percent of Syracuse City School District students receive free or reduced lunch – indications of families’ need for support services, particularly where poverty is most concentrated.

Strong Families

Service providers find that needs are entwined, so untangling one knot may require untangling another first. No winter boots may prevent a parent from bringing her child to a speech therapy appointment. Complex work schedules may result in missed child-wellness visits. Drug addiction and maternal depression may cause child abuse and neglect. Low parent literacy or language barriers may result in children’s language delays. Violent neighborhoods may discourage outdoor walks and play. For these reasons, many successful programs focus on addressing both parent–child needs and often approach child development from multiple angles, including prenatal care, nutrition, parent education, adult literacy and home safety.

Helping children thrive begins with supporting their caregivers. Research has shown that five factors, when present in families, make it less likely for children to experience neglect or abuse.³⁰ These protective factors include:

- **parental resilience** – improves parents’ abilities to respond to stress and face life’s challenges by being able to problem-solve and ask for help, when needed;
- **social connections** – support networks that can help families when in need, and that allow for families to “give back”;
- **knowledge of parenting and child development** – an understanding of a child’s behavior and needs at various development stages;
- **support in times of need** – access to food, shelter, clothing and health-care resources that help families cope during stressful times; and
- **assistance with early intervention and identification** of a child’s behavioral and emotional challenges, and access to high-quality early care and education.

In a series of parent focus groups undertaken as part of the study, parents were asked what they thought is needed to help families raise successful children.

Of the 100 focus group participants, 26 parents were men and 76 were women. Seventy-two had children less than five years of age. Nearly 45 parents spoke a primary language other than English. Seventy-one lived in the city of Syracuse. Parents told us they would like:

- Better access to early childcare and education services.
- Extended hours for childcare.
- Childcare education experts to come to their homes to provide help.
- Recommendations, rather than mandates, for improving their children’s education outcomes.
- Schools that are safe and comfortable for their children.

“There can be no doubt about the important role that families play in a child’s early life, and that they are the foremost influence on development. Children’s health, development, and overall well-being are inextricably linked to the ongoing support and nurturing they receive from parents, and, in turn, the protection of strong and stable family relationships. Thus, the presence of strong families that provide consistent and supportive relationships is a vital element in the healthy development of children.

–New York State Early Childhood Plan



Reaching parents early can help break the generational cycles of poor parenting skills transferring again and again, so many programs focus on teen parents. Adolescent pregnancy has been linked to poorer health, higher school dropout rates, less schooling, poverty and low aspirations.³¹ According to New York State Vital Statistics Data, Onondaga County’s teen birth rates for 15 to 19 year olds are higher than the state average, in particular in the poorest zip codes where there are from 88.4 to 107.7 births per 1,000 females aged 15-19. The New York State teen birth rate is 22.5 births per 1,000 females aged 15-19.³²

The Onondaga County Health Department’s Healthy Families division pays special attention to pregnant and parenting teens in the Syracuse City School District. The Family Life Team follows pregnant teens and babies until the child turns two. Care includes home visits that focus on nutrition, child development, parenting skills, maternal health, domestic violence prevention, accessing public assistance benefits and any other needs the young families may have. Last year, the team assisted 79 pregnant students.

Healthy Start, Healthy Teens/Healthy Babies, run by Catholic Charities of Onondaga County, assists 100 teen parents in the city of Syracuse annually. This program matches case managers with pregnant or parenting women, who have children under the age of 2. Most of the teen parents have dropped out of high school, says Michelle Haas, director of Catholic Charities’ parenting programs. The youngest parent in the past year was 14 years old, and her 14-year-old partner attended the meetings, too.

HOME VISITATION PROGRAMS

High-quality home visitation programs – particularly those that teach parenting skills and healthy behaviors along with the social and cognitive needs of very young children – have been shown to be effective at supporting families.³⁴ A study conducted by the Economic Policy Institute found that for every \$1 spent on high-quality home visitation programs, there is a \$3 savings.³⁵

Agencies and services would like to reach more families, but are faced with limited program resources and the challenge in engaging parents and caregivers with regard to their children’s educational and wellbeing needs.

Families may also have difficulties accessing services due to lack of transportation or language barriers, unawareness of available services, and the perceived stigma in asking for help.

Kathy Harter, executive director of The Children’s Consortium, which serves as a resource for parents, said that families and children are suffering as program budgets are cut and services scaled back. “The biggest challenge we face is financial,” Harter said. Another “huge” challenge, she said, is reaching families before there’s a problem. “Let’s start working with moms before a baby crawls,” she said.

MANOS: Children in Dual-Language/English-Learning Families

Research has shown that children from dual-language homes—either one or both caregivers speak a language other than English – and English-learning homes – in which the adults aren’t proficient in English – benefit from early learning educational opportunities.³³ In the City school district, the Seymour Dual Language Academy is a pre-k – 5 school of 544 students, of whom 53% are of Hispanic origin.

Partners in Learning, Inc. has offered the MANOS Early Child Education program and family literacy activities since 1989. MANOS is a culturally and linguistically responsive learning environment where parents, families and children learn together. Central to the MANOS mission is connecting families with our community’s schools, jobs, English language, and urban life to improve literacy and language skills in English and Spanish and build cross-cultural connections to support the social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and physical growth of immigrant, refugee and migrant children ages 3 through 5. MANOS Intergenerational Learning Circles expand on the Imagination Library monthly book distribution by offering parent and child time and adult education classes at the MANOS site; and extending the school connection into the home through journal writing and home visits. Partnerships are the key to the MANOS program, which relies on strong partnerships with parents and extended family, the Syracuse City School District, Head Start, the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County, Syracuse University Literacy Corps, and community volunteers.

ABC Cayuga-Strong Families from the Start

ABC Cayuga brings people together to make Cayuga County “the best possible place to be a child.” To guide their work, they adopted an approach known as Strengthening Families. Developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, the framework has a proven record of benefiting families from all socio-economic backgrounds by helping them build on strengths and buffer risks, making them more resilient to the challenges all families face.

An example of the projects ABC Cayuga supports are the Auburn Community Cafes, and their “conversations that matter,” which bring parents together to discuss the joys and challenges of raising children in Cayuga County. The Auburn Community Cafes are modeled after the best-practice national program called Parent Café that engages parents in meaningful conversations about what matters most – their family and how to strengthen the family by building protective factors.

Although these services are cost-effective, they usually require more staffing and training, and therefore, additional funds.

Families usually must meet specific criteria to qualify for the home visiting programs in Onondaga County, which, like the services for teen mothers, are offered through various nonprofit organizations and government agencies. These programs are voluntary, and are often part of larger strategies to improve health, education and access to mental health and intervention services. Some programs, such as the Nurse Family Partnership, are discussed in the Healthy Children section on pg. 24.

The early childhood learning programs **Head Start/Early Head Start**, managed by PEACE, Inc., have home-based services for 97 children in low-income families in Onondaga County. There are 75 slots in Early Head Start offered to pregnant women and children from birth to age 3; and 22 slots in Head Start, for children aged 3 to 5. Vanessa Garrant, who oversees the home-based HS/EHS programs, said that PEACE, Inc. tries to match available HS/EHS services to families’ needs. For example, she said, a family living in rural Onondaga County with no available HS/EHS provider nearby may be a good fit for a home-based program.

In home-based HS/EHS, an educator visits a family for 90 minutes weekly, helping parents find “teachable moments” with their children as they play, feed, read to and care for them. Visits take the “whole child” approach that encompasses such areas as health, nutrition, social-emotional well-being, and physical and cognitive development. Twice a month, children and their parents come together in small groups for field trips and group learning opportunities. These group meetings also help children develop some of the social skills they will eventually need in kindergarten.

Early Head Start services are also open to expecting parents. In these programs, families are visited by a registered nurse, who offers information about pre- and post-natal education, breastfeeding, childbirth, newborn education, and other topics to help parents prepare for the arrival of their baby.

Head Start requires more than 50 percent of the Head Start Policy Council members to be parents. Christine Scott, HS/EHS family and community services manager, said that parents feel more engaged when they can help set the goals for their children.

Catholic Charities of Onondaga County offers several home-visitation programs to families in need. The **Parent Aide Program** has been available in our community for more than 40 years. Through intensive home visits, professional parent aides work with families whose children are at risk of being placed in foster care. Some families have been mandated to participate in the program, and others volunteer, Haas said. One of the critical components of these visits is to develop trust between the parent aide and caregivers, so the parent aide can work with families to develop positive skills and behaviors. Most parents participating in this program have not had a high school education. “They’re the most vulnerable and disenfranchised group in the community,” she said, “so developing a relationship with them is key.” Approximately 200 families with 1,200 children participate in the program each year.

In the **Incredible Years Parenting Classes**, another service offered by Catholic Charities in Onondaga County, parent mentors spend time with families in their homes, helping them learn the development stages and the skills needed to manage troublesome childhood behaviors. Parents also attend daily or evening classes. Classes focus on these various childhood stages. An average of 12 parents attends the evening classes each week, and an average of 18 parents attend the daytime classes.

PARENT EDUCATION

The Children’s Consortium has worked in Central New York since 1973, providing home-based educational programs and resources to nearly 1,000 families in Onondaga County annually. Programs include:

- **Parents as Teachers** – teaches parenting skills to parents of children from birth to age 3 with home visitation, group meetings, developmental screenings, and resource and referrals.
- **Baby Beginnings** – focuses on parenting skills, health and wellness, and literacy/language development. A parent educator will visit the mom and baby while they are still in the hospital and the program includes a newborn class for both parents, plus a community parenting class. The consortium was recently awarded an \$82,000 grant to expand “Baby Beginnings” to include Onondaga County’s three major hospitals: Crouse, St. Joseph’s and Upstate.

- **Teenage Parenting Program** – provides an informal, yet structured environment within which teen parents can build supportive relationships, share problems and successes, develop parenting skills, and learn new techniques to replace those that might be harmful to a child. The program is offered to teens in four Syracuse high schools and also offers a discussion group called Teens-as-Parenting Partners Drop-In.
- **Ladders to Literacy... Get Ready to Read!** – is a five-week workshop series designed to help parents ensure that their children are equipped with the fundamental skills necessary for learning to read.

Kathy Harter offered this advice for how to engage parents and caregivers:

- “Go where they are,” she said. Organizations can host events at libraries, visit church groups, meet parents at park. There are many ways to meet parents where they are, she said. This shows how much an organization is willing to help, and it moves them from seeming as “threatening” outsiders.
- Children’s needs and challenges are constantly changing, she said, and so parents will need to learn new communication skills. Remind parents that what may have worked before with their child when he or she was eight, may not work when he or she turns 16.
- Help parents understand that, “Parenting is really the hardest job you’ll ever love.” Parenting is a job, and every-

one has room to improve as a parent, and it often requires training and skill building.

- Teach parents that most mistakes can be corrected. For example, a parent who has exercised corporal punishment on his or her child in the past, can learn a new way of discipline.
- Remind parents that they are their children’s first and best teacher. “Preserving and strengthening a child’s self-esteem is very important.”

In the **Syracuse City School District**, parents are welcome to volunteer in their child’s pre-k classroom and participate in the parent-aide training program. Parents can also participate on advisory committees, and each pre-k center provides a monthly family involvement activity to encourage interactive parent/child learning. Parents are also involved in the “Raising Readers” and “Literacy Tree” initiatives to encourage their child’s love of reading and the development of pre-literacy skills.

A newer SCSD initiative to support and engage parents of pre-k to 12 is the Say Yes to Education Parent University, which offers free workshops not only to parents, but also other adult family members. Monique Wright-Williams, executive director of parent and family engagement, said the workshops are about “giving the parents the strengths and supports so they can feel empowered.” Class topics have included: parenting young adolescents, budgeting, identity theft prevention, credit rating improvement, and understanding the districts code of conduct.

Head Start: Launching the War on Childhood Poverty

Head Start is a federal program created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society initiatives to offset inequality in social and economic opportunities and help break the cycle of poverty. As a comprehensive early childhood development program, Head Start includes a strong focus on parent participation.

The program that inspired the creation of Head Start was “The Children’s Center”, a program started by Dr. Bettye Caldwell, then a research associate at Syracuse University, and Dr. Julius Richmond, then-chairman of pediatrics at Upstate University Hospital, later the first national director of Project Head Start then Surgeon General. The story is told in an April 2013 column by Sean Kirst who spoke with Dr. Caldwell about President Obama’s call for a renewed emphasis on early childhood education. Kirst recorded Caldwell’s words about the findings of her early research on early childhood development: “What do they need?” Caldwell said. “They need to be loved. They need to be spoken to, all the time. They need opportunities to explore. They need to be safe and feel safe. They need stable figures in their lives. They need new experiences. They need to repeat experiences they enjoy.”

What started as an 8-week national demonstration program modeled on a small initiative in an old house on East Adams Street in Syracuse is now a full-year, full-day program to promote the school readiness of children ages birth to five from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social and emotional development. Head Start and Early Head Start, created in 1994, emphasize the role of parents as their child’s first and most important teacher. Head Start programs build relationships with families that support parent involvement and family self-sufficiency.

A national evaluation conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., and Columbia University’s Center for Children and Families, in collaboration with the Early Head Start Research Consortium,³⁶ found:

- three-year-old Early Head Start Children performed significantly better on a range of measures of cognitive, language, and social-emotional development than a randomly assigned control group.
- parents of the three-year-olds scored significantly higher than control group parents on many aspects of home environment and parenting behavior.
- positive impacts on parents in progress towards self-sufficiency, and for fathers specifically.

A Model Program: Touchpoints

Touchpoints is a parent-centered philosophy that guides providers and caregivers to treat the parent as the “expert,” the most important person in that child’s life. The philosophy encourages providers to focus on helping the parent do what’s needed for the child at any specific developmental stage. Touchpoints was developed by pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton as a “map” of behavioral and emotional developments for children from birth to age three.

The Onondaga County Health Department has been trained in the Touchpoints philosophy, and Linda Karmen, the department’s former deputy commissioner, said the philosophy helps strengthen adult-to-adult relationships. It becomes a “continuous approach to help parents work through” the specific challenges that come with each developmental stage, she said. “When you have a Touchpoints community,” Karmen said, “all of the stakeholders are all trained in the same philosophy.” This ensures that everyone working at the school, agency, hospital, etc., is aware of children’s early development stages and the importance of the parent-child relationship. At Children’s Hospital in Boston, for example, every adult that a parent might come into contact with is given Touchpoints training, even the custodial staff, so that the philosophy creates a universal understanding and welcoming environment.

Touchpoints is strong locally in the Onondaga County Health Department and at Catholic Charities, but Karmen said it has been difficult to sustain at child-care facilities because of the high staff turnover rate.

To help with transportation, the program provides bus vouchers, and the district also reimburses for childcare expenses while parents are in classes.

Classes are offered in the evenings and during lunch hours (called “lunch and learns”). To reach more parents, Parent University has an iPhone and Droid app, along with a Facebook page. Wright-Williams said she has been researching ways to deliver programs to parents so that they don’t need to “show up.” The Parent University in Charlotte, N.C., for example, offers online courses for parents and family members, but Wright-Williams said Syracuse isn’t quite ready for that. While many parents here do have computers, she said, they don’t have Internet access.

STRONG FAMILIES

Findings

- Caregivers’ needs are entwined with their children’s needs. If families aren’t receiving the support they need, children suffer.
- Education and support of parents and caregivers is central to the health and development of our community’s children.
- High quality home visitation programs have been shown to be very effective interventions in providing support to families and young children.

Recommendations

- Commit to a universal parent education program that delivers simple messages to parents as Too Small to Fail, Zero to Three and other national organizations do to let parents know that simple things make a difference in a child’s development. Use community partners and multiple distribution methods, including social media, to distribute these messages to parents and grand-parents throughout the community.
- Promote a 1-800-number for parents to obtain information about children and developmental stage benchmarks. The hotline can serve as a parent navigator system that will help parents identify local resources and help families answer basic parenting questions.
- Expand home visitation programs with the goal of universal home visitation for new parents most at risk of experiencing difficulties at home with a newborn.
- Convene a learning community for practitioners in early childhood family support programs to develop a framework for sharing best practices and professional development.
- Invigorate and expand the Touchpoints program throughout the early childhood system to reach a tipping point where the majority of the early care providers have received training and are working from this framework.



DEVELOPING THE WHOLE CHILD

The fastest period of brain growth occurs during the first three years of life, laying the groundwork for a strong and resilient future of health and development, or a weak and brittle foundation.³⁷

Healthy Children

The whole-child approach (which includes a strong emphasis on prenatal care) takes into consideration everything – physical health, nutrition, exercise, environment, family supports, socio-economic

status, culture, ethnicity, access to needed services, language spoken at home, – that might contribute to how well a child is developing the five components determined to be essential to early learning:

1. social-emotional development
2. physical well-being and motor development
3. how children approach learning
4. language development
5. cognition and general knowledge

“.....
 The health of children is fundamental to their overall well-being, and to the vitality of families and communities. Health is a comprehensive concept that encompasses prevention and management of illness, injury, and disability; promotion of positive healthy behaviors; and optimal development in multiple domains, including physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive development. Health is a basic universal goal, and all children should have access to high-quality, comprehensive health care services.

–NYS Early Childhood Plan

Linda Karmen, former deputy commissioner of the Onondaga County Health Department, emphasized the importance of looking at the development of the whole child, not just their physical health. Inequities in development open up early. “Family resources play a huge role” and there is a “growing gap” between families with means and families without means even before kindergarten, Karmen said. Early intervention is more effective than later remediation in attempting to equalize the effects of deprivation.

Onondaga County Health Department’s efforts focus on children’s access to health care and insurance, well-child visits, immunizations, prenatal care and postpartum support.

Children born prematurely (before 37 weeks) and those with low-birth weight (under 5.5 pounds) have the highest risks for adverse health outcomes. They represent the major concerns for children’s health, according to Sue Serrao, the health department’s Healthy Families Division Director.

In Onondaga County, minority children are more likely than white children to be born prematurely and with low birth weights, with black children facing the highest risks.

According to the 2013 Onondaga County Community Health Assessment and Improvement Plan, the infant mortality rate for black children in the County is nearly triple that of whites. From 2010 through 2012, the infant mortality rate for blacks was 12.4 per 1,000 live births, and for whites, it was 4.3 per 1,000 live births. For Hispanics, the infant mortality rate was 8.3 per 1,000 live births.³⁸

The County’s plan refers to these disparities as a “plague” to our community, and states:

“Onondaga County continues to witness challenges in this domain, with unacceptable racial and ethnic disparities in infant mortality, low birth weight, pre-term deliveries, and adolescent pregnancies. While concerning, most of the indicators are trending down, indicating that

overall maternal and child health outcomes are improving. Other outliers include indicators relating to breastfeeding, where Onondaga County is doing poorly compared to NYS. On a positive note, indicators assessing access to care demonstrate that Onondaga County fares better than the rest of NY with women more likely to receive early prenatal care and children more likely to be screened for lead poisoning.”³⁹

HEALTHY FAMILIES

The Onondaga County Health Department coordinates health services and care for pregnant women and children through its Healthy Families division. There is no charge for services, which may include case management and referrals to other providers or resources. Home visits by public health nurses, community health workers and a social worker are concentrated on those identified at high risk for infant mortality, low birth weight, or developmental delays or disabilities. Through the department’s home visitation programs, more than 10,300 home visits were made in 2012, and 2,865 clients served under all the various home visitation programs combined. To encourage participation, the health department has partnered with other agencies to refer eligible clients and families in need. It has also networked with churches and other community organizations to provide information and advocacy for its programs and services.

The Healthy Families division programs include:

- **Immunization Clinic** – provides shots to children aged two months and older. The “walk-in” clinic tries to target children who are underinsured, uninsured and without access to medical care. Adults can also receive vaccinations, if they meet the education requirements and are over the age of 18.
- **Community Health Worker Program** – targets families identified at high-risk for infant mortality, low birth weight, or developmental delays or disabilities, providing outreach, case management and advocacy to pregnant and parenting families in Onondaga County.



- **Syracuse Healthy Start** – focuses on the residents of the city of Syracuse. Part of its mission is to help reduce the disparities in prenatal and postpartum care, and reduce the infant mortality rate within the city. It promotes healthy pregnancies and babies through community partnerships, referrals, health education and case management. One of its initiatives is to educate parents on safe sleeping.
- **Special Children Services** – provides evaluations, education and therapy services to children from birth to age five with developmental delays or disabilities.
- **Early Intervention Program** – state and federally mandated program to identify children birth through age two with diagnosed conditions and developmental delays and provide needed services.
- **Early Intervention CARES (Children At-Risk Early Screening)** – identifies children from birth through age two who are at risk for developmental delays. This program is part of a statewide Early Intervention Child Find Program.

Nurse-Family Partnership: The “Gold Standard” of Care

Nurse-Family Partnership maternal health program introduces vulnerable first-time parents to caring maternal and child health nurses. Nurses deliver the support first-time mothers need to have a healthy pregnancy, become knowledgeable and responsible parents, and provide their babies with the best possible start in life. The relationship between mother and nurse provides the foundation for strong families.

A cornerstone of Nurse-Family Partnership is the extensive research on the model conducted over the last three decades.

Research has consistently proven that NFP is a successful in improving outcomes for children and families. Measured outcomes in mothers have included: reduction in use of public assistance; better employment; improved father presence and relationship stability; more time between subsequent pregnancies; better prenatal diet; less prenatal smoking; and fewer diagnoses of pregnancy-induced hypertension. For babies, results have shown: stronger cognitive and language development; better school preparedness; higher academic achievement; better impulse control; more ability to adjust to life’s challenges (resiliency); and reduction in abuse and neglect.⁴⁰ In terms of cost savings, a 2011 Washington State Institute for Public Policy meta-analysis reported a 6 percent return on money invested in NFP programs.⁴¹ Cost savings were found by conducting a cost-benefit analysis of NFP’s measured outcomes, which included: high school graduation rates, grade repetition, crime, special education needs, substance abuse, employment, public assistance, disruptive behavior symptoms, and child abuse and neglect.

- **Pre-School Special Education** – a state and federally mandated program available to children aged three to five who have a developmental delay that affects learning. The child’s eligibility is determined by his or her school district’s special education department based on state and federal regulations.
- **The Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program** – provides assistance to eligible women to buy healthy WIC food for themselves and their families. Onondaga County’s program serves approximately 11,300 clients per month.

Nurse-Family Partnership

The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program, a nationally recognized evidence-based program run locally through Onondaga County’s Healthy Families division, could be called the “gold standard” of care. Operating in 43 states nationwide, the NFP features home visitation by highly trained public health nurses to provide prenatal and postpartum education, care and support to vulnerable, pregnant women who are aged 24 or younger. Central to the NFP model is the development of a genuine trust-based relationship between nurse and client, to help the young mother develop self-sufficiency and achieve positive parenting skills.

In 2013, the NFP assisted 184 women in Onondaga County; the average age of new mothers in the program is 17 and 18. It costs approximately \$500,000 per year for the County to run NFP, which includes four or five nurses trained in the curriculum. Each nurse has a caseload of 25 clients. With a recently obtained grant, the program will add three more nurses to serve a total of 200 first-time mothers. This still misses an estimated 100 others in need, according to Susan Serrao, director of the Healthy

Families division. The program is funded mostly with federal funds that are distributed through the New York State Health Department with about 35 percent of its funding from the local level. The biggest cost to the program is the training that ensures the local program is adhering to the national program’s data collection, and other regulations, Serrao said.

HEALTH CONCERNS

Positive Drug Screens

A major concern in our community is the high number of newborns who have positive drug screens, indicating their mothers abused drugs while pregnant. Every newborn in Onondaga County is screened before discharge from a hospital, and the County’s positive drug-screen discharge rate is the highest in the state. The County’s plan reports:

For 2009-2011, the Onondaga County rate was 248.3 per 10,000 births compared to 72.6 per 10,000 births for NYS. This represents a statistically significant difference and is supported by an increase in mothers’ self-reported illegal drug use. This appears to be a problem specific to the maternal and infant population, as the overall drug related hospitalization rate is significantly lower in Onondaga County compared to NYS.⁴²

In Onondaga County, from 2008-2012, there were 27,097 live births recorded. Of these 1,345 (5%) were to mothers who self-reported illegal drug use during pregnancy.

The report says that newborns with positive drug screens may suffer from neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS), which means that babies show withdrawal symptoms from prenatal drug use, primarily opiates. To reduce NAS and maternal alcohol/drug abuse, the health department has engaged in five community collaborations with hospitals, agencies, law enforcement and other community organizations

School District Health Concerns

Dr. Maritza Alvarado, director of Syracuse City School District health services, outlined some of the main student health concerns that manifest in schools:

1. **Lack of immunizations** – Many children were prevented from registering for the 2013-2014 school year because they lacked the required immunizations. Yowali Balume, a registered nurse and the clinic coordinator at St. Joseph’s Primary Care Center – West, formerly the Westside Family Health Center, said many children come to the clinic overdue for their well-visits and immunizations because their caregivers don’t understand the importance of well-child visits, particularly in the birth to 2 year old age group, when visits are so frequent. To combat this, the clinic is being more proactive about educating families. Alvarado said the SCSD used to be able to send families to the Onondaga County Immunizations Clinic, but the clinic now only serves uninsured patients.
2. **Dental health** – Inadequate dental health care is another common health concern for students. Many families are on Medicaid, and few dentists in the area accept Medicaid.

Success By 6 – United Way of Central New York

Success By 6 is an early childhood advocacy effort led by the United Way in over 300 cities, counties, and states in America and Canada. It is a community-based, public-private partnership of individuals and organizations that share a common vision – children ready to succeed when they enter school. Success By 6 gathers leaders of business, education, government and the community to work on behalf of young children. Locally, the Success By 6 mission promotes the concept that by age 6, all children in Onondaga County will attain the necessary mental, physical, social and emotional development to successfully embrace educational and social opportunities for growth and learning. The Success by 6 priorities are:

- Improve literacy rates for youth in Onondaga County.
- Improve dental health education and prevention in Onondaga County.
- Decrease rates of childhood obesity in Onondaga County.
- Increase support for Early Education initiatives in Onondaga County.

To help bridge this gap, the district participates in CHOMPERS! – a dental health program for pre-k students funded by the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York. CHOMPERS! helps educate children and parents about dental health care and offers such preventative care services as dental exams and sealants. If a child has other dental health needs, he or she is referred to the Syracuse Community Health Center.

3. **Mental health** – Many students exhibit behavioral problems in school that are a result of their unaddressed mental health needs. Oppositional defiant disorder is common, and teachers and parents can be at a loss for how to handle the behaviors. Some schools have guidance counselors and/or social workers, but they mostly do intervention work, not therapeutic work. A “Promise Zones” grant has allowed the SCSD to provide therapists in some schools, but not all. (See “Promise Zones,” below)

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a major issue for children and their families. According to OnCare – a community initiative supporting children and youth (ages 5-21) with significant emotional and behavioral challenges and their families – more than 5,000 children in Onondaga County have been diagnosed with a Serious Emotional Disturbance. And while our community does have mental health resources for children and their families, the Study Committee learned there are not enough programs and services to meet the need, especially at low- or no-cost.

To help with this, the County is collaborating with the Syracuse City School District to provide a mental health clinician and Student Based Intervention Team-Behavior (SBIT-B) in each city school. Known as **Promise Zones**, the SBIT-B teams are built in partnership with St. Joseph’s Hospital, ARISE and the Brownell Center, and services will focus on managing difficult behaviors and short-term mental health intervention services, rather than long-term therapeutic care.

Children usually show signs of trauma in school – or unaddressed grief as a result of exposure to violence – when they reach 10 years old, said Dr. Maritza Alvarado, director of SCSD health services. By this time, Alvarado said, some students have witnessed or experienced violence in their community, and the children carry this trauma with them. “It’s difficult to diagnose these issues early on [because young children can’t verbalize it],” she said. By the time they are 10, the children may be exhibiting signs of behavioral trouble that could be related to trauma, and they are able to talk about it.

“The role of trauma is big. Big,” said Teresa Hargrave, a psychiatrist at Upstate Medical University. “Parents are heart-sick. They feel like kids are out of control and don’t know what to do.” Through a program called Child and Adolescent Primary Care, Hargrave helps medical providers teach parents ways to mediate their children’s problem behaviors and meet their mental health needs.

Another risk factor for children during the early years is the presence of maternal depression. Many programs serving pregnant women and new mothers routinely screen for depression and try to intervene early. Michelle Haas, director of Catholic Charities’ parenting programs, told the committee that case managers in the Healthy Start program, which assists pregnant teens and parenting teens (with children under the age of 2) in the city of Syracuse, reported a rise in postpartum and maternal depression.

To help parents who have mental health concerns, Catholic Charities offers Better Beginnings for Parents & Children. This program offers home-based, intensive, comprehensive, and flexible clinical therapeutic services to families in which one or both parents have a history of chronic mental illness. Therapy is conducted in individual, family, and group sessions by qualified professionals.

HEALTHY CHILDREN

Findings

- Early childhood adversity negatively impacts health over the lifespan.
- Early intervention can repair early adverse experiences that damage children’s healthy development.
- Providers cite major mental health concerns in our community’s children, often as a result from toxic stress environments, and these concerns affecting early childhood development and later learning.

Recommendations

- Invest in more high quality home visitation services including expansions to Nurse – Family Partnership and Early Head Start programs to ensure healthy home environments in which the child’s needs are being addressed.
- Pediatricians and other health practitioners throughout the County should be engaged in discussion of the critical role they play in identifying at-risk parents and children and identifying young children who would benefit from early intervention programs.
- Develop strategies and partners to make sure all children have a medical home and that parents bring their children to recommended well care visits.
- Tackling the problem of drug-related births should be a priority; the Study Committee supports the County Health Department’s collaborative system approach to addressing the issue.
- Develop an aggressive campaign to educate on postpartum depression and to provide help to caregivers impacted by depression.
- Expand awareness of young children’s mental health and the coordination and availability of mental health interventions for caregivers and children in the earliest years.



The significance of the early childhood years on learning is well documented and the impact of failing to provide an environment where all children are given the opportunity to succeed is well recognized. The fundamental purpose of this study was to survey the current early childhood landscape in Onondaga County, assess the accomplishments and challenges, and consider how we might more effectively deploy our existing resources so that that all children enter school ready to learn.

Conclusion



In these pages we have provided an overview of what is happening and what is possible, both here and in other communities, in an attempt to answer the critical question of how well our community is meeting the needs of all children from birth to age five. This proved to be a challenge largely because we as a community do not have a strategic, systematic approach that answers some fundamental questions such as: How many children are not receiving basic medical attention? How many children are not getting access to quality daycare programs? What does it mean to be ready for school?

Although there are many great programs in existence and much to laud, significant obstacles remain for families and service providers, leaving too many children without the care and attention they deserve. Insufficient funding for many programs may be a constraint, but it is clear that collaborative goal setting and better coordination among existing services and programs could result in measurable improvement. Though faced with limitations such as complex regulations and funding restrictions, that need not stop us from creating a coordinated system where all of the engaged stakeholders – healthcare providers, caregivers, educators – deliver their excellent services more effectively and efficiently.

The recommendation to form a coalition could be interpreted as merely “kicking the can down the road.” It is not. Research has shown that a coordinated systems approach that integrates all of the foundational elements for success – early learning, health, strong families – is a critical to improve school readiness. The New York State Early Childhood Plan embraces this idea and we are fortunate that our community is poised to carry out this recommendation. The Education Task Force Syracuse 20/20 has agreed to facilitate this effort, our City, County and school leaders fully support the concept, and a number of community stakeholders stand ready to participate.

The OCL Study Committee has faithfully and enthusiastically guided this year-long effort to investigate and evaluate how our community approaches the issue of school readiness. The passion and commitment of so many dedicated individuals in our community is inspiring. Perhaps such dedication is to be expected as we are talking about our children. What we hope to have accomplished by this study is to draw greater attention to the subject, to assess some of the strengths and weaknesses of current programs, and to make recommendations that will aid in the ongoing efforts.

If we as a community help all of our children “thrive by five” we are all better off.

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Appendix: OCL Studies

1979	Equality and Fairness in Property Assessment
1980	Young People in Trouble: Can Our Services be Organized and Delivered More Effectively?
1981	The County Legislature: Its Function, Size and Structure
1982	Declining School Enrollments: Opportunities for Cooperative Adaptations
1983	Onondaga County Public Works Infrastructure: Status, Funding and Responsibilities
1984	Police Services in Onondaga County: A Review and Recommendations
1985	The City and County Charters: Time for Revision?
1986-87	Blueprints for the Future: Recommendations for the Year 2000
1988	The Role of the Food Industry in the Economy of Onondaga County
1989	Poverty and its Social Costs: Are There Long-term Solutions?
1990	Syracuse Area Workforce of the Future: How Do We Prepare?
1991	Schools that Work: Models in Education that Can be Used in Onondaga County
1992	Town and Village Governments: Opportunities for Cost-effective Changes
1993	The Criminal Justice System in Onondaga County: How Well is it Working?
1994	The Delivery of Human Services: Opportunities for Improvement
1995	Reinvesting in the Community: Opportunities for Economic Development
1996	Building a Non-Violent Community: Successful Strategies for Youth
1997	Security Check: Public Perceptions of Safety and Security
1998	Onondaga County School Systems: Challenges, Goals, and Visions for the Future
1999	Economic Development: Models for Success
2000	Housing and Neighborhoods: Tools for Change
2001	Civic Leadership for Community Transformation
2002	State of the Arts
2003	Mental Health Services: Access, Availability and Responsiveness
2004	Disappearing Democracy? A Report on Political Participation in Onondaga County
2005	Strategic Government Consolidation
2006	Fixing the Hub: Leveraging Better Outcomes for Downtown
2007	How Inequality Makes Us Sick: The Growing Disparities in Health and Health Care
2008-09	Rethinking I-81
2009-10	What Does It Mean To Be Green?
2010-11	Community Image
2012-13	The World at Our Doorstep
2013-14	Early Childhood and School Readiness: Creating a Community Where All Children Thrive by Five

Appendix: OCL Members 2012-2013

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Nan Strickland

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Consulting
The Gifford
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St. Joseph's Hospital
Health Center
Washington Street
Partners, Inc.

CORPORATE BASIC MEMBERS

ARC of Onondaga
ARISE
Children's Consortium
InterFaith Works
Home Builders
Association of CNY
Leadership Greater
Syracuse
Literacy Coalition of
Onondaga County
Messenger
Associates, Inc.
OCM BOCES
Onondaga County
Public Library
Pioneer Companies
SUNY ESF
Syracuse Convention
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Testone, Marshall
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Gregg Tripoli
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