

STRENGTHENING early childhood in KANSAS

"We are ALL Early Childhood Stakeholders"
Governor Laura Kelly

In 2019, Kansas has the opportunity through new federal grant funding to shape our state's future direction for early childhood by developing a comprehensive needs assessment and strategic plan. This collaborative effort invited the voices of all Kansans and resulted in an impressive cross-section of nearly 6,000 contributors. As part of this effort, individuals across the state joined to share their vision for the early childhood care and education (ECCE) system they want to see in their communities.

VISIONING SESSIONS AND PARENT CAFÉS

These visioning sessions and parent cafés modeled the same approach taken at community engagement sessions, with the intent to gather information and perspectives on the ECCE system. Visioning sessions were designed to be included as components of regular ECCE meetings at the state, regional and local levels. Parent cafés, hosted by staff from Kansas Children's Service League, were critical to incorporating the parent perspective from often unheard voices. Both served to help create a common foundation for engagement in strengthening the early childhood system. Participants were asked:

What bright spots, services, or attributes does your community have to support young children and families that we should be amplifying and celebrating?

Tell us about your vision for early childhood in your community. What would you see, hear, and experience?

What gaps do you see between the early childhood system as it is and your vision? What is one particular area we should focus on improving immediately?

20

sessions

20

communities

654

participants

PARTICIPANTS

- ECCE Leadership Groups
- ECCE Coalitions
- Kansas Breastfeeding Coalition
- Substance Abuse Case Managers
- DCF Administrators
- State and Local Elected Officials
- KCSL Parent Engagement Coordinators
- Statewide School Administrators

PARENT CAFÉ GROUPS AND LOCATIONS

- Miracles, Inc.
- TOP Early Learning Centers
- Kinship Support Group
- Female Corrections Facilities
- Male Corrections Facilities
- Healthy Families Nights
- Adult Residential Facilities
- Wichita
- Dodge City
- Garden City
- Liberal
- Independence
- Emporia
- Topeka
- Pittsburg
- Overland Park

"I could use less stigma and more intense and informative parenting support." - Parent

What we heard from Kansans

UNIVERSAL FINDINGS

Families have basic needs that are not being met, and that is driving the way they do or do not interact with the early childhood system. These experiences differ greatly across the state.

OTHER THEMES THAT EMERGED

★ **Lack of affordable, accessible childcare was mentioned in every session.**

There is a severe shortage of childcare for infants, children with special needs, care during non-traditional work hours, and in rural and frontier counties.

★ **Workforce issues are a critical contributor to this shortage.**

There is a decreasing number of providers entering and remaining in the field primarily due to the inability to make a living wage. There is a need for valuing, respecting, and fairly compensating child care providers.

★ **A significant number of young children are not having preschool experiences prior to kindergarten.**

Transportation and affordability are significant barriers. Smaller communities lack preschools outside of special needs and Head Start.

★ **Funding as a priority need.**

This need is not only to increase the amount of funding, but also to restructure how it is allocated.

★ **Parent engagement and support should be the norm (starting prenatally).**

There is inconsistency across the state in basic services such as affordable housing, available healthy food, transportation, and safe places for children to play. Parents are often too proud or afraid to ask for help. Working parents need supports to be able to provide nurture and care for their children.

★ **Lack of awareness and stigma limit parents' access to services.**

Early childhood services are too limited by eligibility criteria which excludes families above the poverty level or without significant risk factors. Services should be "normalized".

★ **Lack of health care availability.**

Many communities don't have a pediatrician within 60 miles. The need for Medicaid expansion was also widely voiced. Families, especially those in rural areas, have limited access to health care specialists. Additionally, there is a significant shortage of mental/behavioral health services across the state.

"We need paid parental leave—it is pivotal to economic security during a child's earliest development." - Community Leader

BRIGHT SPOTS FROM PARENT CAFÉS

- Local faith-based entities provide resources
- Local support groups such as healthy families and network groups
- Mental health services (counseling, therapy or rehab)
- Federal assistance programs
- Local banks for budgeting, credit counseling, etc.
- Life skills classes and community activities

"We need stronger connections between health care and early childhood providers." - Parent