

“The very basis of a healthy, vibrant, and productive community lies in the early years of a child’s development.”

Annie Busch, Co-Chair, Early Childhood Committee,
Springfield Strategic Plan

Decreased funding from traditional sources, difficult economic times, and increases in unmet needs of young children create growing pressures for change in the area of early childhood. In response, many early care and education professionals have united to implement quality initiatives focused on improving the lives of more than 17,500 children under the age of five in the Springfield-Greene County area.

Blue Ribbons

Collaboration

The key to Springfield’s early childhood blue ribbons is collaboration. When resources are maximized through collaboration, the needs of children and families are better met. Examples of current collaboration include:

- The creation of the Jordan Valley Community Health Center and its efforts to house various community partners like Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Parents As Teachers (PAT), and the Springfield Greene-County Library within the same building, which increases accessibility of services for families with young children.
- The Early Care & Education Collaborative of the Community Partnership of the Ozarks, along with its member agencies, serves as the starting point for collaborations in this area.



More than 1,000 children and families attended Community Wide Play Day 2011.

Using shared resources, such as staff, facilities, and funding, to maximize the return on investment for events and programs provides the Greene County early childhood community an opportunity to improve the lives of young children and families.

Growing Support from Public Officials

Increasing awareness of the critical need for high-quality early childhood education has recently been illustrated by the inclusion of early childhood as a topic within the City of Springfield’s Strategic Plan and a city/county/school systems platform in support of children and families.

As this movement gains momentum, public and private leaders will need to put these plans and platforms into action to see the desired results of creating a community that supports safe, happy, healthy, and successful children.

Continued Response to Red Flags

Agencies and organizations throughout the Springfield and Greene County area have focused efforts on red flags identified in previous *Community Focus* reports. Most notably, the Grantmakers’ Challenge for Children leveraged \$22 million from 35 partner organizations to support services focused on addressing the red flags that most affect the lives of young children in the area.

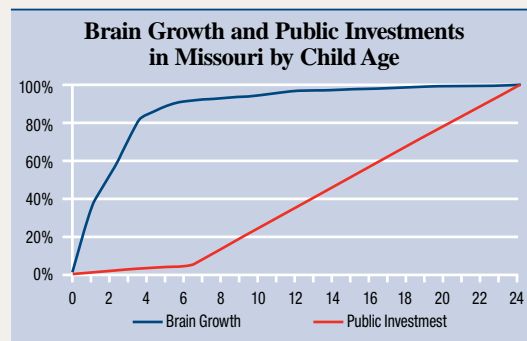
RED FLAGS

The state of our nation’s economy has had a residual effect on the area of early childhood in the Greene County area, including increased poverty, higher incidence of child abuse and neglect, and decreased funding for multiple areas related to early childhood.

Decreased Funding in Multiple Areas Affecting Early Childhood

Over the past two years, state and local budget cuts have resulted in decreased funding to almost all service areas for children and families. For example, cutting Parents as Teachers by 50 percent means elimination of the only true universal prevention service in the area and significantly fewer children from birth to age five receiving home visits to check for proper development and cognitive learning. The earlier delays are identified, the sooner remediation can occur, thereby reducing later costs for special education. Significant cuts to Child Care Aware® of Southern Missouri and Educare result in less training and support for local childcare providers as well as changes to the resource and referral service model serving families. Children receiving Medicaid in need of mental health services often face months of waiting and those seeking dental services can face weeks of wait time, due primarily to the reduction in reimbursement for health care providers. To a child, this means living with pain.

Research shows that the greatest human brain development occurs during the first three years of life. However, public investment is minimal during that critical time and only reaches its highest point in the period of young adulthood. With budget constraints in mind, shifting available funds to invest more fully in supporting young children with prevention services will result in less expense in areas such as increased dropout rates, behavior problems, drug and substance abuse, and criminal activity. All of these have greater costs to society than the prevention efforts expended during the early years. The most recent research supported by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis indicates an \$8 - \$17 return on investment for every \$1 invested in early childhood.



Source: Center for Family Policy & Research, 2010

Effect of Poverty on Children

The 2009 *Community Focus* report highlighted the interconnected role poverty plays in all areas of the Springfield-Greene County community, specifically early childhood. Poverty affects homelessness and housing quality*, health and nutrition, educational success, child abuse and neglect rates,

and school readiness. The community has acknowledged and continued to work to address the symptoms of poverty among children and families through focused programming.

According to MO Kids Count 2010, Springfield-Greene County has 5,586 (26.6 percent) of its children under age 6 living in poverty, a 59.8 percent increase over 2000 Census data. Despite the increase in the number of children in poverty, less than 40 percent of the 5,500 children are receiving Medicaid services and only 26 percent receive childcare subsidies.

Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse and neglect rates continue to be of concern in Greene County. In 2009 the number of substantiated cases of abuse and/or neglect decreased, but the number of hotline calls and family assessments remained very high. The community must stay vigilant in our preventive efforts to keep kids safe. The average age of a child entering Children’s Division custody in Greene County is 4.89 years. During the 2.5 years the average child is in custody, he or she will move three times. To these abused and/or neglected children, the abuse is consuming and has lingering effects.

Compared with the general population, children who have been in the system are less likely to graduate from high school or attend college, 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed as adults, more likely to experience homelessness, and more likely to have a chronic illness, such as asthma, auditory or visual problems, diabetes, or malnutrition, due to the lack of quality medical care. Children leaving foster care are at greater risk for substance abuse, early parenthood, and incarceration. These intangible losses should not be overlooked as part of the cost associated with violence against children.

State of Early Care and Education

Each week in Springfield and Greene County, thousands of children under age five are in the care of someone other than their parents. For these families, affordability continues to be a concern.

Childcare costs are a major expense for any family, often higher than the cost of college

Childcare Costs	
Average Wkly Cost of FT Childcare	In 2011
Infant/Toddler Care (Home/Center)	\$113/\$169
2+ Years Care (Home/Center)	\$94/\$106

Source: Child Care Aware® of Southern Missouri, January 2011

tuition. A Greene County family with an infant and preschooler will pay an average of \$1,191 per month for care in a center, which equates to \$14,300 per year – a dollar figure far too high for many families in the area. Close to 1,500 Greene County families receive state subsidies to help pay for childcare so they can maintain employment and/or complete education. However, Missouri’s childcare subsidies are so low – 49th of the 50 states in subsidy rate – that the difference between subsidies, actual cost, and how to pay for it, means childcare choices are sometimes based on affordability rather than quality.

Despite research showing that approximately 80 percent of the brain develops by age 3, Missouri holds childcare programs to few standards that assure even minimally healthy child

development. Therefore, quality of care is a great concern. Childcare providers are often paid minimal wages, averaging \$9.11 per hour, yet we place the responsibility of developing the brains of the area’s youngest citizens in their hands. Missouri law requires those who provide haircuts, manicures, and tattoos to complete hundreds of hours of training prior to serving the public, but no pre-employment training is required for those who provide care to young children.

Research has shown that children who participate in a high-quality early childhood experience are more successful in kindergarten, but it also shows that children who experience a low-quality childcare are more negatively affected than if they had attended no pre-K at all. In response, several agencies are collaborating to create a training consortium to provide greater access to relevant training for childcare providers, a standard measure of quality for Greene County childcare providers, and a heightened awareness of the need for these programs and initiatives.

School Readiness

As indicated in the 2009 *Community Focus* report, kindergarten readiness* is an area where many Springfield and Greene County children struggle. Based upon the latest Readiness for Kindergarten study, released in March 2011, teachers continue to say that 20.2 percent of students enter kindergarten not socially or emotionally ready, based upon the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA).

Children who experience high-quality early childhood education are more prepared for kindergarten, and therefore, typically more successful. However, many families cannot afford to provide this needed preschool experience to their children. The Readiness for Kindergarten study determined that 86 percent of students ineligible for free or reduced lunch were prepared while only 72 percent of free or reduced lunch recipients were considered to be prepared.

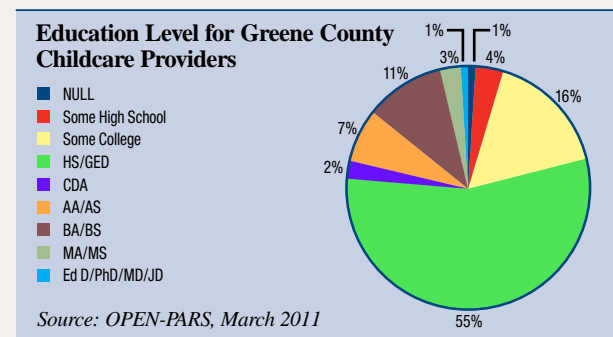
In response to this identified red flag, an active group of Springfield and Greene County early care and education professionals are collaborating to create a plan for offering voluntary universal access to high-quality preschool programs for all children in the area. Making high-quality preschool accessible to all children is critical to addressing kindergarten readiness in Greene County and will require broad-based public and private support.

Inability to Convert Public Support to Action

While political, business, and general community members acknowledge and verbally support the need for quality early childhood services, true progress will require community engagement and action to transform the established system into a more effective method of preparing our 21st century workforce and fueling the economic growth within Springfield and Greene County.

Simple offerings within the business community like flex-time, job share, work from home, and unpaid leave for family issues can lower turnover and absenteeism and increase employee morale and productivity, providing an attractive return on investment for the employer while supporting families. Given the number of children whose parents work, private-sector policies that benefit work/life balance for families are needed now more than ever.

Follow-through by political leaders to develop and implement a plan to support early childhood services is necessary. The Springfield-Greene County community must be prepared to support city and county movements toward universal access to pre-K and other needed preventative services in the years to come. Community engagement in early childhood education nurtures not only our children, but also our broader community growth and success.



Source: OPEN-PARS, March 2011

*Indicates Emerging Issue in 2009 Community Focus Report