

From: Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies
To: Annie E. Casey Foundation
The Urban Institute – National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership
Re: Preliminary Work Plan for Improving School Readiness and Early Grade
Success in Hamilton County
Date: March 2, 2009

As a follow up to the policy brief developed under Phase I of the Annie E. Casey Foundation to the Community Research Council (now, The Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies), we wanted to outline a preliminary forward looking work plan for improving school readiness and early grade success in Hamilton County, Tennessee. The work plan will be the subject of review on March 19 by the nineteen member Advisory Board that was convened as part of the project.

Review of Key Findings and Recommendations of Policy Brief

The July 2008 Policy Brief, *School Readiness and Early Grade Success in Hamilton County, Tennessee*, concluded that approximately one in four children born in Hamilton County are at risk of not being ready for school. Those children most at risk were concentrated in inner city areas of Chattanooga. These areas had the highest percentages of risk factors such as mothers without a high school education, children who were low birth weight babies, those with teen mothers and those born in a single parent family. Between 2001 and 2006, more than 3,000 children were born in five neighborhoods indicating the highest number of risk factors.

The Policy Brief identified six steps that service providers, funders (both governmental and philanthropic) and the community as a whole can take to begin to ensure that effective interventions are efficiently provided to those children in the community most in need and – by doing so – increase the likelihood of early grade success in Hamilton County public schools

- Identify those children who are at risk from birth and provide these children with a continuum of services
- Ensure that parents, child care providers, parent educators and teachers of every child work together to provide children with the resources and programs needed to overcome risks to academic achievement
- Identify opportunities for coordination and integration of services to improve service provision and avoid duplication

- Connect the early childhood program providers community with the school system so that the knowledge and information on each child is passed along and used
- Develop a basic, easy to use instrument – based on best practices elsewhere and consultation with Kindergarten teachers, Pre-Kindergarten teachers and child care providers – that provides assessment information on school readiness for every child entering Hamilton County schools.
- Using the common assessment tool, develop a database that captures this child by child information and can be used to develop school performance based outcome measures for early childhood interventions

Going Forward

For the next two years, the Advisory Board – with support from the Ochs Center – will work toward achieving the objectives identified in the Policy Brief. These additional steps – with the exception of the Policy Forum – are all premised on the ability to obtain additional funding for support of this effort.

In the current year, the Advisory Board will take the following steps:

- The Ochs Center will begin to convene regular meetings of the Advisory Board again. These meetings will become the forum for initial discussions related to service integration, collaboration and coordination.
- The Ochs Center will conduct two additional research projects. During the May 2009 kindergarten registration process, the Ochs Center will survey the parents of all new kindergarteners on prior interventions (e.g. child care programs, Head Start, etc.). In addition, the Ochs Center will convene a series of focus groups with early childhood providers and Hamilton County public school kindergarten teachers.
- The Advisory Board will plan and hold a one day policy forum on school readiness and early grade success by the end of May.¹
- After the Policy Forum, the work of the Advisory Board will focus on developing a specific, consensus work plan for implementing the six steps in the Policy Brief. The goal will be to complete the plan by the end of 2009. The Consensus Work Plan will consider and detail possible program and policy actions, including but not limited to:
 - **Creating a permanent coordinating council on early childhood programs in Hamilton County:** The coordinating council would create an ongoing forum for coordination and collaboration. The coordinating council would also be the mechanism for moving forward with implementation of other recommendations of the Consensus Work Plan.

¹ The Ochs Center has applied for new grant funding to support both the kindergarten parent survey, the focus groups and to supplement AECF funding for the policy forum. We will be notified of the outcome of our proposal by April 7, 2009. If funding is approved, we will go forward with the survey and the focus groups prior to the Policy Forum. If funding is not approved, the Ochs Center will continue to seek outside funding to support these elements of research but will proceed with the Policy Forum by the end of May.

- **Identifying or creating a new, common instrument to assess school readiness:** There needs to be a single agreed upon instrument that can assess readiness upon a child entering public school. With an agreed to measure, student readiness can both inform public schools and early childhood programs as to the efficacy of different interventions for different children.
- **Developing a countywide database on early childhood interventions for all children entering Hamilton County public schools:** A single database would both help early childhood programs (and their funders) measure outcomes and provide snapshot information to teachers and other school officials on the experiences and learning of children before coming into the public school system.
- **Establishing an early warning/early intervention program for all at risk children born in Hamilton County:** Every year, there are one thousand children born in Hamilton County who for demographic, health and other reasons can be deemed as “at risk” of not succeeding in school. That’s fewer than three children born every day. There needs to be a systemic approach to planning and providing services for these children that starts at birth. While some new services may be required, it would be just as important to ensure that at risk children are connected to quality, existing services.
- **Drafting a service integration and quality assurance plan for all publicly funded or regulated early childhood programs in Hamilton County:** The Policy Brief detailed a wide array of programming available for young children in Hamilton County. But while many programs exist, there is wide variation in quality. Moreover, different children with different circumstances may need different interventions. There is no current means of knowing whether services are truly matched to need. To address this concern, there needs to be a coordinated service integration and quality assurance plan for any program that either is funded – or regulated – by state or local government.
- **Publishing an annual public/private Hamilton County early childhood budget:** An annual budget would both highlight how public and philanthropic funds are currently spent and where potential needs exist. The single early childhood budget would help to inform more strategic budget making by government and philanthropic organizations (e.g. United Way, foundations).

Next year, based on the Consensus Work Plan, the Advisory Board will work to identify public and private financial resources to begin implementation. This effort will include close coordination and collaboration with the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, as well as other officials in state and local government.

Funding

The Ochs Center has already applied for a \$20,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga to continue the work of the Advisory Board. Additional grant opportunities are under review. Eventually, the Consensus Work Plan should be a vehicle for seeking federal, state and local funding to support implementation.