

EXPLORING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION NEEDS AND OPTIONS IN THE
SOUTHERN TIER

A draft report prepared for the New York State Appalachian Regional Commission program office

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Introduction.

Much can be said about early childhood education and its potential to benefit the Southern Tier. This report, unfortunately, is not a comprehensive analysis. However, it does point out several critical issues relating to this subject and suggests directions for future work.

Summary.

- *Early child care needs are growing throughout the Southern Tier.
- *Contemporary trends indicate the need for a particular type of child care: developmental early childhood education.
- *Early childhood education is further indicated by the relative deprivation suffered by so many of the region's children.
- *However, both needs and availability of educational child care services are unevenly spread.
- *There is no state certification for early child education curriculum and there is no official state-wide credential for childcare aids. There is also no official specialized credential for childcare professionals.
- *These factors represent challenges for the region as well as challenge responses to child care needs.
- *The multiple and uneven needs and resources of the region, in combination with the need to ensure and encourage professionalism and appropriate curriculum emphasis, suggest an approach centered in existing child care educational infrastructure and professional experience.

ARC and child care.

Previous program emphasis limited child-care project funding to programs justified by the dependent care needs of corporations and employees. Addressing such needs is significant to economic development. However, such a limited justification proscribes the strong consideration of other important benefits.

ARC's new goal that "Appalachian residents will have the skills and knowledge necessary to compete in the world economy in the 21st century" heads the objective: "Appalachian communities will ensure that all students arrive at school ready to learn." Associated with this is the strategy, "support the development of comprehensive, community-based early education programs for children and families." The "ready to learn" objective and corresponding strategy provide the broadest possible justification for the expenditure of ARC resources on child care projects.

The growing need for child care.

ARC's new emphasis on child care comes at a time of growing need for developmental child care in the Southern Tier. This is associated with national trends, but is exacerbated by local socioeconomic conditions.

As the economy continues to require more advanced skills, individual and community-level competitiveness will require ever greater levels of educational readiness. Early childhood education contributes to the development of important learning skills at a critical juncture, and thus prepares children for further advancement.

Social restructuring has also resulted in an ever greater need for quality child care. This in part results from the long-term breakdown of the extended family. Relatives often are not available to tend to the needs of children whose parents are otherwise occupied. The growing number of two-income families, with increasing numbers of mothers in the work place, has exacerbated this. A growing number of single parents further increases the need for child care.

Unfortunately, need is especially severe for some children. Childhood poverty is associated with single parenthood, especially single motherhood. This is the case for several reasons. In part, this results from the fact that many of these children result from young mothers' illegitimate pregnancies.

These mothers, as a group, tend to be of lower socioeconomic status. As such, they are less able to provide for both the material and developmental needs of their children.

Aside from socioeconomic background, the poverty of many children of single parent families results from the fact that their parents are too often unable to earn a living through a full-time job, due to dependent care obligations. Or, if these parents do take full-time jobs, their children are too often subject to baby sitters or other non-professional care settings. Aside from immediate potential risks associated with uncertified sitters, there is no guarantee that such situations provide children with the developmental stimulation that is crucial to their later success. Indeed, they probably do not.

For many poor children of single parents, child care is critical in that it responds to two needs. Child care meets immediate family needs to free the parent from dependant care obligations in order to make a living. And, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to require proportionately more and higher quality developmental attention.

Such early education is critical to making these children competitive, to cutting short a cycle of poverty, and to the long-term success of area development. Professional early educational programs, which provide a stimulating environment, are critical because they break down the limiting nature of poverty, both in terms of the real opportunities they provide children, and in the positive affect of these programs on children's sense of confidence, esteem, and world-view. As such, these programs counteract the limiting social environment typical of lower class families.

Headstart programs have been proven to effectively contribute to the educational and socioeconomic success of their participants through life. Headstart works because it breaks down the isolation of these children, builds their social interactive skills, and their positive image of self. While head-start is a needs tested program, it is not an entitlement, as it is not available for all of those who qualify for participation. This is in part the case because the program is centered in the region's larger urban areas.

The need for child care in the region will be exacerbated when benefit limits built into recent state and national welfare reform legislation begin to take effect. Requirements for participation in job training, and for work after an appointed time period has passed, will urgently increase the need for

child care. While this situation is challenging, it represents a potential opportunity to combine addressing children's developmental needs, the imperatives of welfare reform, and the need to address dependent care obligations for individuals and corporations.

The need for child care in the Southern Tier.

The New York State Kids Count statistical manual, sponsored in part by the Department of Social Services, identifies the potential demand for child care, by county, using census data. This data indicate that around fifty percent of the children of most counties in the Southern Tier are potentially in need of child care. This estimate is drawn from Census family structure and employment statistics. The counties with the greatest overall potential need are the three largest ones: Broome, Chautauqua, and Chemung. Because potential need is figured by comparing the numbers of children with the working-hours of parents, the size of potential need in these counties is mostly a function of their overall population.

There are, however, substantive considerations which exacerbate the condition indicated by these demographic data. Relative socioeconomic conditions throughout the Southern Tier indicate a greater overall need for developmental child care or early childhood education than raw demographic figures might at first indicate. The Southern Tier faces higher rates of poverty and other conditions that are detrimental to child development. The effects of these conditions could be addressed, in part, through developmental child care.

The Kids Count manual identifies uneven need within the Southern Tier. The manual identifies Census tracts that are severely distressed in terms that threaten child welfare. The manual's gauge of distress includes important social and economic characteristics, such as poverty rates. The three large counties each contain severely distressed tracts in their urban cores. The only other severely distressed tract is in the Seneca Nation's Cattaraugus Indian Reservation. The three large counties also contain the most tracts that, in terms of conditions conducive to child welfare, fall between severely distressed and average. This exacerbates the need for child care in these counties. These counties further have the greatest potential employee need for child care, being the most economically developed, and also, may be most severely affected by welfare reform legislation. However, these counties may

already have the greatest existing child care capacity, including Headstart programs.

Having said this, there is ample need for better and more child care throughout the Southern Tier. Early childhood education is critical to addressing both a plurality of present needs and ensuring the future competitiveness of the region. A failure to ensure better childhood education in the Southern Tier will not simply preclude the resolution of present needs, it will ensure that the region's residents become more isolated and less competitive in the future.

However, aside from some broad indications provided by aggregate social welfare statistics, the severity and sorts of local needs and the varieties of present assets in specific areas are difficult to judge from a central position. State use of ARC funds should allow flexibility in addressing needs and utilizing current resources that vary across the region.

North Carolina's approach to child care.

The State of North Carolina has been a leader in addressing the child care issue. The North Carolina Department of Human Resources report titled "Looking Forward, Looking Back," provides an excellent discussion of the state's Smart Start/ARC child care initiatives.

North Carolina's efforts are explicitly connected to broader agendas of community capacity building, educational readiness, and economic development. Further, North Carolina's initiative is associated with the development of a regional identity for Appalachian North Carolina's communities. Such an identity, a positive group-subjective outlook, is preliminary to successful regional development, the report contends. The report contends that the process of developing locally-based childcare programs is as significant to the community as the resultant services themselves.

The comprehensive nature of North Carolina's interventionist approach is justified by severe poverty, isolation, and very low literacy levels in Appalachian North Carolina. Relevant statistics cited suggest that much of Appalachian North Carolina is facing a crisis of deprivation.

While comprehensive intervention may be justified in North Carolina, it is questionable, given available resources, whether

New York State's Appalachian Region would fully benefit from such an activist ARC effort relative to alternative expenditures. Nevertheless, Appalachian New York could benefit from more focussed efforts in child care. Significant opportunities exist to "support the development of comprehensive, community-based early education programs" in the Southern Tier. Such efforts have the potential for substantial social, economic, and educational payoffs.

What child care must accomplish.

In order to address the needs of the Southern Tier's youth, early education programs must be structured with high quality curricula that properly stimulate children and develop the skills most critical to their future competitiveness.

Childcare curriculum falls into two related categories: that which guides developmental child care education and that which guides the education of providers. New York State has made some efforts towards this, but has failed to provide for state-wide certification of childcare centers and specialized professionals based on a coherent developmental curriculum. This is unfortunate and represents a challenge which must be taken into consideration in light of programmatic child care efforts.

Centers should be accredited based on curriculum requirements and providers should be certified based on ability, experience, and educational training. While there is no state certification for child care workers, there are credentials. The problem with the credentials is that they are not universal or, in the case of the State Education Department's N-6 primary teacher certification, they are not specialized.

The lack of an official curriculum is in itself a challenge to child care today. And, this problem indicates that state certification is insufficient to ensure that projects provide the quality of child care that children of the region need. The New York State Department of Social Services currently certifies day care centers based on health and safety regulations. While health and safety are prerequisite to good early education, they are insufficient to meet the needs of children today. Child care centers must meet educational standards as well.

While New York State does not have an official early education center or professional training curriculum, the State has expended efforts towards the development of such. These

efforts, and the professional experience that has gone into them, and issued from them, should be taken into consideration.

A quality childcare curriculum emphasizes skills crucial to future success. Developmental child care prepares children for further education and social interaction in several important respects. While many have focussed on the need to educate young children through curricula that center on specific skills and knowledge, such as beginning reading skills, counting, shapes, colors, et cetera, these are not the primary skills with which early education programs must be concerned. The most important thing for a child care program to accomplish is not to teach children things, but rather, to give children abilities that are fundamental to present and future successful social interaction, learning, and skills development. These skills, the substance of assuring that children arrive to school ready to learn, are based on stimulating interaction with trained adults. This stimulation centers around conversations, questions and answers, and mutual projects. This sort of interaction is important for all children, but invaluable to disadvantaged and isolated children. Information learned in such an environment is an adjunct benefit of such stimulation.

The most important abilities with which child care efforts must be concerned are then summed as language skills. All other developmental benefits of child care eventually can be traced back to language skills. The development of language skills is important because so much of this occurs, or does not, in early childhood. Also, children must have advanced language skills in order to absorb lessons and respond to teachers' queries. Primary school admission evaluation tests are centered on language skills. In the primary educational environment, what a child knows or does not know is secondary to that child's ability to interact, question, and express knowledge. Indeed, language skills and knowledge are intimately connected. Language skills, the ability to formulate and express ideas, determine whether a child will be able to absorb, manipulate, and express knowledge, as knowledge is framed by the individual in linguistic terms.

Language skills determine how well children will interact with adults generally, which is critical to later educational success. Advanced language skills result in a bridge of trust between children and adults and open children to a broader world of developmental stimulation, and give them a head start on education and social skills development. Further, a stimulating environment built on linguistic interaction with professional adults ensures that children will have a sense of self-esteem

and confidence necessary for future success. Children must be accomplished at, and enjoy, interaction with adults and other children in a manner which is not infantile or one way, but rather, interactive and so, substantive and enriching. Children who are eager and able to interact in such a fashion absorb knowledge readily, and seek knowledge, solve problems, engage the world, and are not burdened by fear or a lack of confidence.

It is especially critical that children from disadvantaged families receive this sort of stimulation, as it is often lacking in the home. While some children from disadvantaged families are simply not stimulated enough, many are stimulated in a manner that is detrimental to future success. Lower class parents are often associated with erratic and impulsive responses to children's actions. They are also typically more authoritarian and less explanatory and conversational in the guidance of their children. The result is too often children who have a poor understanding of the world around them, who cannot relate to or interact with that world, and who have a poor image of self. This may be the most important factor contributing to future failure to compete and thrive. It is, more than objective material disadvantage, the most serious disadvantage facing these children. It causes them to be formally or subjectively tracked at an early age away from opportunities of a more rigorous education.

Unfortunately, in the Southern Tier, there are many children who live under such conditions. They are comprised by both poor, often black, inner-city children and poor children in isolated rural towns and villages. The challenges that such children face, and their consequences, are not easily distinguishable. The most serious consequence is that the problem recreates itself with successive generations. The above discussion indicates the need to get disadvantaged children into professional childcare environments as soon as possible. More generally, however, it gives substance, in light of ARC's broader mission, to childcare program emphasis.

Programmatic recommendations.

Given the needs of the region and its children, expenditure of ARC funds should go towards increasing the availability of early child education that concentrates on the development of key social and cognitive skills, especially language skills.

A limited approach to this would simply be to encourage more early child education projects that can demonstrate need and appropriate educational content. Such an approach, however, may not result in the most efficient or effective use of funds. Each project applicant would have to reinvent the wheel in terms of developing cooperative community support, identifying need, developing or adopting curriculum, determining professional credentials, et cetera. The resulting situation might be child care projects that would not necessarily be as coordinated with each other and with other area efforts as is desirable, given uneven need and resources, and the need to ensure consistent educational standards, in the area.

The above discussion should not preclude a limited or piecemeal approach. Such would be better than doing nothing. The area could, however, benefit from a broader approach. Challenges discussed above represent problems for the region and challenges to the implementation of an emphasis on child care, beyond the occasional project grant. These conditions indicate that neither the program office nor the LDDs contain the expertise to coordinate a serious early educational program. Further, it is questionable whether funding individual programs in isolation effects a maximum benefit.

In order to address the problems posed by uneven needs, uneven resources, and the problematic nature of curriculum and personnel qualifications, the program and LDDs might best work with the region's professionals who are already working in the child care field. ARC resources might best be spent building the capacity for coordinating child care provision, cooperative solutions to child care problems, professional training, and the determination and implementation of child care standards. Much greater cooperation, efficiency, quality assurance, and equity can be achieved through capacity building child care coordination.

Individuals working within existing child care infrastructure need to be involved in the coordination of child care capacity building and project funding. There are three possible institutional infrastructures which could facilitate these efforts: the State Department of Social Services, the State Education Department, and area BOCES campuses in cooperation with the LDDs. Coordinating child care projects through Social Services may be problematic because of the agency's conflicting emphases and because the department does not have enough appropriate bottom-up local presence that would be necessary to facilitate needs identification, professional and programmatic development and cooperation, and local capacity building.

The State Education Department itself has an interest in both early education professional certification and child care center certification, though efforts towards these ends, to my knowledge, have not resulted in official certification beyond the relatively unspecialized N-6 primary education teacher certification. Further, the State Education Department per se, as with the Department of Social Services, may not have the field presence and experience that seems so important to community sensitive coordination. However, beyond this, I am unprepared to make further judgement.

It seems that the most logical place to look for the sort of programmatic coordination is among the regional BOCES organizations. These institutions represent potentially valuable advantages because most are already engaged in both the provision of early child education and in the training of child care providers. Therefore, they have a direct interest in developmental early child education curriculum standards. BOCES-based efforts have contributed to the development and application of critical skills and primarily language skills curriculum and teaching practices.

BOCES campuses are not only involved in these educational matters. These organizations are important social infrastructural resources to area educational development and community capacity efforts. BOCES campuses facilitate a broad range of cooperative developmental efforts and, so, are natural places through which to encourage child care development. Further, personnel at the BOCES campuses are available who are aware of the needs of the areas they serve, and of the resources available. These individuals have access to facilities and resources that allow for the coordination of efforts and the cooperative education and training of starting and seasoned child care providers. BOCES campuses are in a unique position to give many in the field access to current information and resources, and initiate coordination and cooperation.

Working through BOCES would also compound benefits from other ARC expenditures there. Implicit in this is something of a core development strategy to educational development. Community-level childcare development coordination meshes well with current childcare and non-childcare community educational activities at BOCES. Maximizing the community and individual benefits this way is consistent with the performance management philosophy, which focuses on programmatic efficiency and maximum service population benefit.

Without going into too much detail, I would recommend a child care initiative based in the cooperation of the LDDs with willing BOCES campuses. While much more limited in scope than North Carolina's, it would address the area's special needs in a manner that would encourage the maximum potential benefit from ARC funds. A childcare initiative would be a valuable replacement should one of the current initiatives be retired or graduated.

Such an initiative, or even a program emphasis, requires more thought and planning if it is to involve more than simply awarding more child care project grants year to year. Some important questions have yet to be answered:

- What would be the proper role of the LDDs vis a vis other agencies?
- What, in greater specificity, would be the goal and scope of the program?
- How would efforts between the LDDs and the cooperating agency(ies) be initiated?
- What, initially, would be the standards set for effective expenditures?

It seems that answering these questions would involve a dialogue, as well as more formal analysis. These questions are broad and, of course, assume other more specific questions. The greater effort, however, is proportional to the importance of the subject.

On a more limited level, performance standards for child care projects, despite the ultimate scope of the State Program's emphasis, are fairly clear. The most important outcome measurement for such projects would be the number of children who participated in early childhood educational programs. The outcome, measuring the success of that education, would be something like the number of children educated in the program who entered kindergarten at or above grade level, and thus needed no remedial attention. (Incidentally, such measurement is facilitated by BOCES participation.)

Early child education programs, of course, benefit children well beyond kindergarten admittance. Headstart and other programs have been shown to positively resonate throughout an individual's lifetime. However, measuring much later effects becomes very problematic.