

Early Childhood Initiative Makes Progress

Since May 2015, County Commissioner Page Lemel and County Manager Jaime Laughter have been leading a group of dedicated professionals engaged in close collaboration on behalf of Transylvania County's youngest residents: the birth – five-year-old population. This group, the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) Task Force, is comprised of key stakeholders from a range of organizations in Transylvania County. Because of the profound and far-reaching ramifications of growth and development during early childhood, the mission of the ECI Task Force is two-fold: to build the capabilities of caregivers and to strengthen the communities that together form the environment of relationships essential to children's lifelong learning, health, and behavior.

Identifying Problems, Creating Solutions

The ECI Task Force compiled the information central to the December 2015 State of the Child Report outlining the opportunities and challenges for families with children of this age range in Transylvania County. Findings from the State of the Child Report mobilized the ECI Task Force to act on behalf of the needs of the birth – five-year-old population. Upon identifying the major realms of concern for these children, the group divided into smaller focus groups addressing five major topics: early childhood education (co-chairs: Nan Lee and September Ferguson-Fisher); family resources (chair: Erin Drew); health/mental health (chair: Elaine Russell); recreation (chair: Carleen Dixon); and fund development (chair: Lee McMinn). Some of the ECI Task Force's accomplishments thus far in 2016 include:

Early Childhood Education

- Smart Start and the Family Place sponsored a forum on February 22 promoting communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers and improving the transition from preschool to kindergarten, with an emphasis on kindergarten readiness.
- Nan Lee and Preschool Lead Teacher Heather McCracken facilitated a series of workshops in February for preschool teachers focusing on literacy, math, and executive function.
- Transylvania County Library added Summer Reading incentive activities for birth through preschool to guide parents in engaging in literacy development with their children.
- WCCA (Western Carolina Community Action) has added two new NC Pre-K classrooms to Brevard Elementary School and one new Early Head Start classroom to Hillview Children's Services, providing early education for 36 additional children in Transylvania County.
- Further exploration is being conducted to study the feasibility of creating a model classroom, as well as a non-profit best-practice-based child care facility, and a local CCR&R (Child Care Resource & Referral) Center.
- The Transylvania County School system has collected more expansive statistical data which shows significant strides in kindergarten preparedness for 2016-2017. Across all TCS schools, there was a 12% increase in children who tested at proficient or above proficient levels upon entering kindergarten.

Family Resources

- WCCA hosted a Kindergarten Readiness Rally held at the Recreation Center on April 7, which was a great success. Multiple organizations were represented and provided information about educational support and activities for 89 families of rising kindergartners.
- A Town Hall meeting was held on April 18 to cultivate open conversation about childcare challenges in Transylvania County. Sponsoring partners for the Forum were The Family Place, Neumann Law Firm, SAFE, Smart Start, The Transylvania County Library Foundation, The Transylvania Times, United Way, and WCCA. Invaluable information was gained from the public about availability/accessibility, quality, and affordability of childcare.
- The Family Place has added 10 Play and Learn kits for parents to check out and take home. These kits provide a selection of materials for parents to explore with their children and maximize both their enjoyment and development in all domains (cognitive, language, social-emotional, and motor skills).

- As part of their “Circle of Parents” parent chats, The Family Place is now leading support groups for families with special needs children, with groups meeting at both their Brevard and Rosman locations.
- The Family Resources focus group of the ECI worked with the Planning Board of the Transylvania County Comprehensive Strategic Plan to ensure that Transylvania County will make it a stated priority to “actively seek to identify needs and encourage coordinated efforts to strengthen the family within our community.”
- A “Summer Happenings” flyer was created compiling free and low-cost educational and recreational activities information for families. A “Winter Happenings” flyer is also in progress.

Health/Mental Health

- Transylvania Public Health has engaged with Dr. Hartye, the chair of the monthly Substance Abuse in Pregnancy Workshop through the Behavioral Health division of Mission Health, to address drug addiction during pregnancy and in newborns. They will be working with two case management nurses from Public Health and using this collaboration as a model program for the region.
- Transylvania Public Health is exploring nurse-family partnerships which would begin at birth to foster health education with a trusted advisor. The most significant impact would be seen with first-time parents on Medicaid.
- Mental Health support solutions are being addressed in a multitude of ways, including research into a mental health kiosk for Transylvania County, action plans, and Transylvania Public Health’s upcoming “Access and Answers to Mental Health Services Community Forum” on October 17. Mental health is recognized as a priority in order to ensure that caregivers are capable of supporting children birth – five years old.
- Hendersonville Pediatrics has partnered with Smart Start with their “Reach Out and READ” program. To date 4,300 books have been given to children during their well-child visits with a prescription to read for 20 minutes each day.
- Behavioral consultant Will Dalton has joined the Hendersonville Pediatrics team to support parents and children birth to 5 and beyond with issues such as picky eating, temper tantrums, sleep problems, toileting difficulties, and more.

Recreation

- In response to family needs for free activities, the Parks and Recreation Department, the Family Place, and the Library hosted Family Splash Day on July 30. Water activities were provided for over 300 people. Future seasonal activity days are also being planned.
- The Recreation Center’s Indoor Play programs for preschoolers and Preschool Summer Camps were incredibly popular and will continue this fall. Spring sessions with up to 112 children in attendance provided low-cost social and recreational activities for families of preschoolers in Transylvania County.
- The Recreation Center has provided instruction in fundamental skills and low-cost fun with their Start Smart Basketball program for four- to five-year-olds. The second session of the popular program concluded with a scrimmage and medal ceremony on October 6.

Funding Development

- United Way has pledged \$100,000 in matching contributions which may be used to help fund special projects of the Early Childhood Initiative as their mission develops. Other funding is being researched.

Onward

The endeavors of the ECI Task Force are ongoing. The group meets monthly to plan, calibrate, discuss research findings, and share accomplishments, while in-depth work is done in the focus groups to further the Task Force’s mission. With so many determined experts undertaking a concerted effort to address the needs of the birth – five-year-old population, the impact is sure to continue to be significant.

The Early Childhood Initiative Task Force includes a number of dedicated and concerned citizens, as well as representatives from the following organizations: the Board of Commissioners; Transylvania County Administration; Transylvania County Health Department; Transylvania Public Health; Transylvania County Social Services; Transylvania County Parks & Recreation Department; Transylvania County Library; Transylvania County Schools; Western Carolina Community Action; Head Start; Smart Start; The Family Place; The Children's Center; United Way; Connect; Transylvania Resource and Information Network; Hendersonville Pediatrics; New Adventure Learning Center; Mountain Sun Community School; Brevard Academy; Rise & Shine Freedom School; El Centro Comunitario Hispano Americano; Early Educator Support, Licensure, and Professional Development; Children's Developmental Services Agency; The Cindy Platt Boys & Girls Club; Self-Help Credit Union; The Haven; The Transylvania Times; Smoky Mountain Center; CARE Coalition; The Hunger Coalition of Transylvania County; Blue Ridge Community Health Services; Lee McMinn; Kae Parker; Jill Swartz; Tamara Nye; June Litchfield; Ali Lien; Catherine Holland; Annelise Hagedorn; Becca Dinsdale; and Cheyenne Brantly.

- *Laura Gardner, Youth Services Librarian, Transylvania County Library*

The attached photos are options for use. We don't have names for those pictured.

Photo Caption Suggestions:

BES NC PreK Classroom 2016 – One of two new Brevard Elementary School NC Pre-K classrooms.

Early Head Start Classroom 2016 – The new Early Head Start classroom that has been added to Hillview Children's Services

Kindergarten Rally 2016 – Parents and rising kindergartners had a chance to meet with representatives of many organizations relevant to young families at the Recreation Center.

Kindergarten Rally 2016 alternate - Parents and rising kindergartners had a chance to meet with representatives of many organizations relevant to young families at the Recreation Center.

Splash Day 2016 – Families from across the county joined in the fun at Splash Day at the Library.