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Solutions for School Readiness: Issues and Answers in Oklahoma

smart start oklahoma

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At least 23 percent of Oklahoma's kindergarten students begin their first important year of school without the age-appropriate skills they need to keep up with their peers.

Among children who begin behind, only one in eight ever catches up. That means nearly 22 percent of all Oklahoma's children are at risk to drop out of school before high school graduation, missing out on career training and higher education.

Another fact:
Oklahoma's economic future depends upon a skilled workforce with jobs that pay a living wage.

Many steps have been taken to improve education in Oklahoma—from all-day kindergarten, to testing for reading and math competency at key grade levels, to accelerated curricula, to better funding for our institutions of higher learning. Those actions represent significant progress for education in our state.

But now we know that education begins at birth.

In fact, neuroscientists tell us that 90 percent of human brain development occurs before a child enters kindergarten. Clearly, children need positive experiences throughout early childhood in order take advantage of this marvelous window of opportunity.

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We know that...

- Children whose parents begin reading to them as soon as they are old enough to gaze at a colorful board book are more likely to develop good language skills, along with a life-long love of learning.
- Moving about in time to rhythmical music and playing simple learning games with family members or neighborhood friends stimulate a child's mind and develop social, sensory and motor skills.
- Children who learn to recognize colors, letters and numbers during normal learning and bonding processes within their families will be more comfortable, and more open to new learning, when they enter school.

While many parents take these teaching and nurturing processes for granted, a substantial number of Oklahoma families need information and support in order to provide these learning experiences for their children. Without adequate income, families may not have access to developmental toys, crafts, books and games. Without transportation, parents may not be able to take their children to public libraries, playgrounds or learning centers—or even to health care providers. Without accurate information, they may not know how to teach their children while feeding, bathing, dressing and transporting them.

Yet, without these positive interactions and exposures in early childhood, our youngest citizens are not likely to enter school healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed. Instead, they may become part of that 22 percent who can't keep up with their peers... who fail to complete high school; who can't earn enough income to be self-sufficient; and who may become teenage parents, ill equipped to give their own children a better start in life.

And the cycle of poverty, deprivation and failure threatens to repeat itself.

Oklahomans Work for School Readiness

Many Oklahoma citizens have long recognized the impact of this cycle on our children and on our state's economy. They have studied the causes surrounding Oklahoma's school readiness rates and have probed for realistic and promising solutions.

Because of their efforts, a former Oklahoma governor appointed a statewide task force to formalize their research and recommend solutions. His successor eagerly accepted their report and worked with our legislature to enact the Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness Act of 2003, which established goals, organizations and mechanisms for improving the future prospects of all Oklahoma children.

The public-private partnership that resulted named our school readiness initiative Smart Start Oklahoma. Smart Start is a proven grassroots method for supporting parents as they give their children a good

start in life. Its aim is a coordinated early childhood system that makes optimal use of existing public and private resources and takes advantage of that five-year window of opportunity for early learning.

Community Mobilization

Each Smart Start initiative is born within a particular community—at the grassroots level—when concerned residents recognize that substantial numbers of their children are arriving at school unprepared to learn. As they delve into the reasons, they usually find poverty, lack of access to basic health and social services, and inadequate information about what developing children need.

Through further research, they discover the resources that are available within their community and begin seeking ways of putting families in need together with people who can help them.

As these concerned citizens grow in numbers and in awareness, they typically draw others into their commitment to improve the lives of their community's youngest. Eventually the group evolves into a strong public-private coalition, with capacity for networking, partnering and collaborating for the benefit of families with young children.

This is the process we call community mobilization. Because it grows from within the community—where local people are addressing local issues with local resources— mobilization can bring about appropriate and acceptable solutions; and it can be sustained over time to accomplish desired results.

Public Engagement

A vital aspect of Smart Start is the education and engagement of the general public about what children need in their early years. Smart Start Oklahoma employs many opportunities and means to:

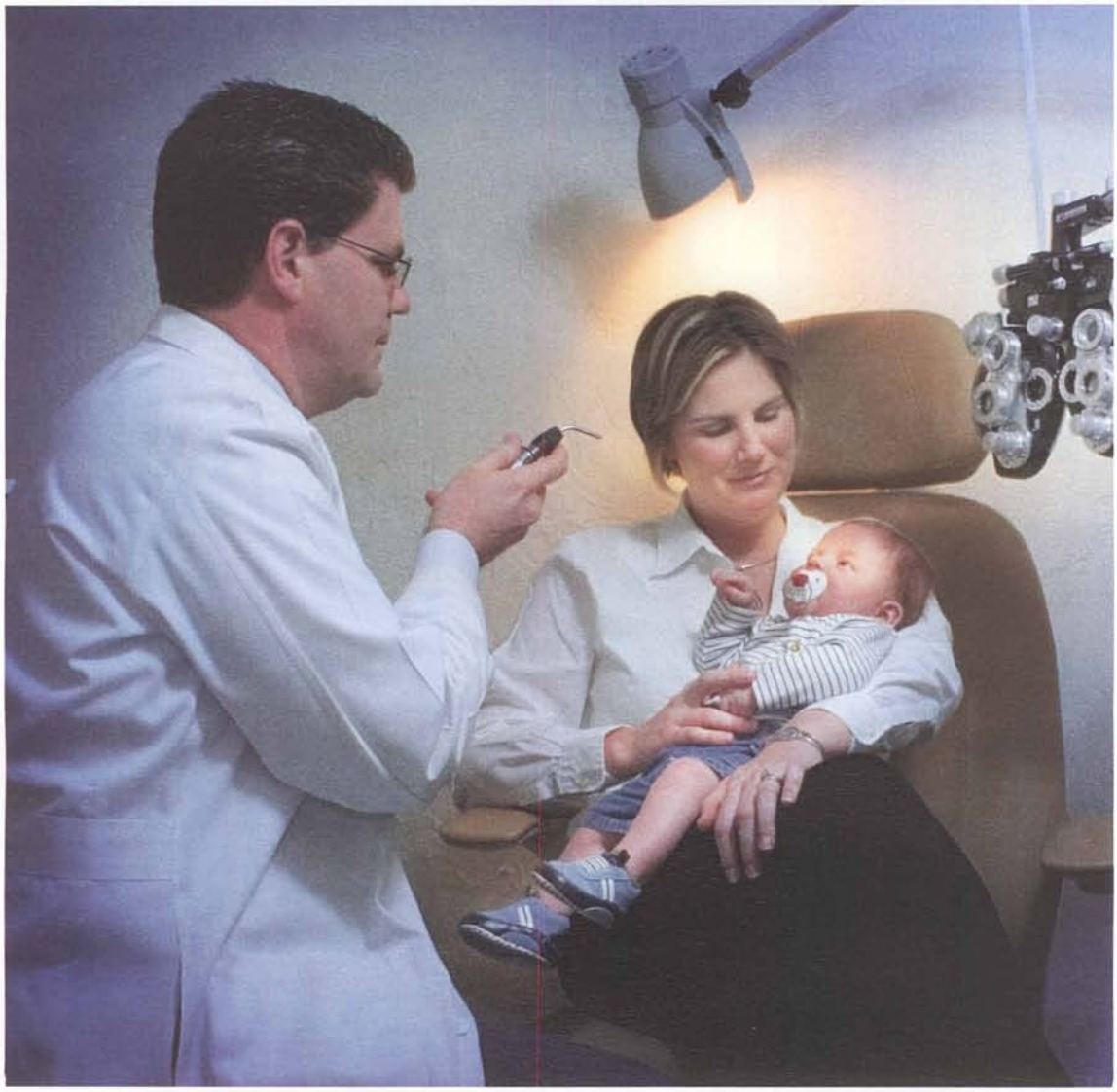
- tell people the facts about human brain development
- encourage reading to young children in order to develop their language skills
- promote volunteerism and business support in building more child-friendly communities
- teach parents how to turn simple, every-day experiences into occasions for enjoyable learning

Support for Parents

Surveys have shown that Oklahoma parents want and need support as they seek to give their children a good start in life.

Smart Start Oklahoma also distributes grants to communities to help improve families' access to educational materials, health care providers and other services needed to keep children safe, healthy and learning eagerly.

THE BEST MOUSE
Olivia Owls OPPOSITES
Hey, Little Baby!
my fi
w o
blackboard
plane
telephone
truck
b o o



Smart Start also distributes a guide for parents, called *As They Grow*, to every family who gives birth in an Oklahoma health care facility. Written and compiled by a child development specialist, the colorful guide contains information about developmental stages and benchmarks from infancy through age five. It also provides health, nurturing and teaching information to help parents interpret and respond appropriately to the "language" of infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers. There is space for tracking growth and development milestones with notes and pictures. *As They Grow* also lists hotlines and other contact information about existing services and resources.

Collaboration

Smart Start communities work hard to build collaboration among school districts, child care providers, faith-based organizations, government institutions and civic leaders—all for the purpose of connecting more children and families with resources they need and want.

Linking Health Care With Early Learning

In communities where health care is an issue for school readiness, collaborative actions combine health care delivery with parent information on nutrition, early developmental stages and early language development. Volunteers visit maternity wards of local hospitals and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) clinics, where they show mothers how to read to their babies as a part of bonding and nurturing. They hand out manuals on parenting and provide lists of community resources and contacts.

Public media are used to educate women about the need for early prenatal care, childhood immunizations and periodic well-child examinations.

Where lack of transportation is a barrier to health care, local transportation services are persuaded to provide free or reduced-fare rides to the county health department or other health care professionals, as well as to grocery stores for improved nutrition.

Communities have arranged for Caring Vans from Blue Cross/Blue Shield to deliver immunizations at pre-schools and at early care and learning centers, where they also provide basic check-ups, along with education about health and hygiene.

Registered nurses visit child care facilities, check immunization records and give or arrange for thousands of immunizations. They also work with children, parents and other caregivers to enhance child safety and prevent accidents. They evaluate and advise on special needs and teach basic hygiene.

Local pediatricians give away books at periodic well-child visits, and optometrists offer free eye exams for three-year-olds, sending them away with a "prescription to read." Local libraries exchange those prescriptions for free books and library cards for the children and show parents age-appropriate books and videos available for lending.

Professionals are beginning to address mental health and behavioral problems at facilities licensed to care for children with special needs. By enhancing coping skills at an early age, they are improving prospects for a successful transition to school.

Enhancing Child Care

Whether child care is provided by parents, family members, or licensed facilities, it should be safe, nurturing and full of stimulating activities that give children basic building blocks for future learning.

Within the Family

Isolated families in some areas have been accustomed to visits from tribal representatives who tutor students and teach reading skills. Through community collaboration, these programs now have better tools for promoting early language development. They emphasize reading to infants; distribute baby books and parenting literature; and support parents preparing their children for school.

Parent resource rooms have been established and staffed within urban neighborhoods, often at a public elementary school, to offer a safe, family-friendly environment where parents can read, play and watch videos with their children, or engage them in coloring and craft projects. In some neighborhoods, the room offers English as a Second Language classes for adults, with staff members or volunteers on hand to read to and interact with their children during class time.

Outside the Home

For parents who need child care outside the family, community collaboration has brought about unprecedented improvements to the quality and capacity available within some areas.

Regional Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

Placed strategically to serve every county in the state, these agencies have continued their primary mission to:

- Educate parents about selecting quality care facilities
- Offer referrals to appropriate facilities
- Inform eligible families about available child care subsidies
- Encourage and assist potential providers to meet the demand
- Help existing providers enrich their curricula and earn higher ratings

Beyond these traditional services, the agencies now collaborate within coalitions to provide families with transportation to and from child care; to refer them to other types of social services; and to inform them about Head Start and Early Head Start opportunities.

Business Support

Business partners have refurbished run-down child care facilities, donated computers and money for scholarships, equipped provider resource libraries and even supplied canned goods to supplement the daily diets of children in care.

Some employers, seeing the benefits of supporting their employees' parenting demands, have offered flexible work schedules, subsidized the cost of child care and allowed parents time off to attend functions with their children. Employers have also allowed parenting classes to be taught during lunch periods and permitted parenting information to be placed in their break rooms.

Child Care Providers

Child care providers have formed associations to promote professionalism, share ideas and material resources, and support each other in their efforts to improve. At association meetings, they hear speakers, make inexpensive toys for their students and learn new teaching techniques.

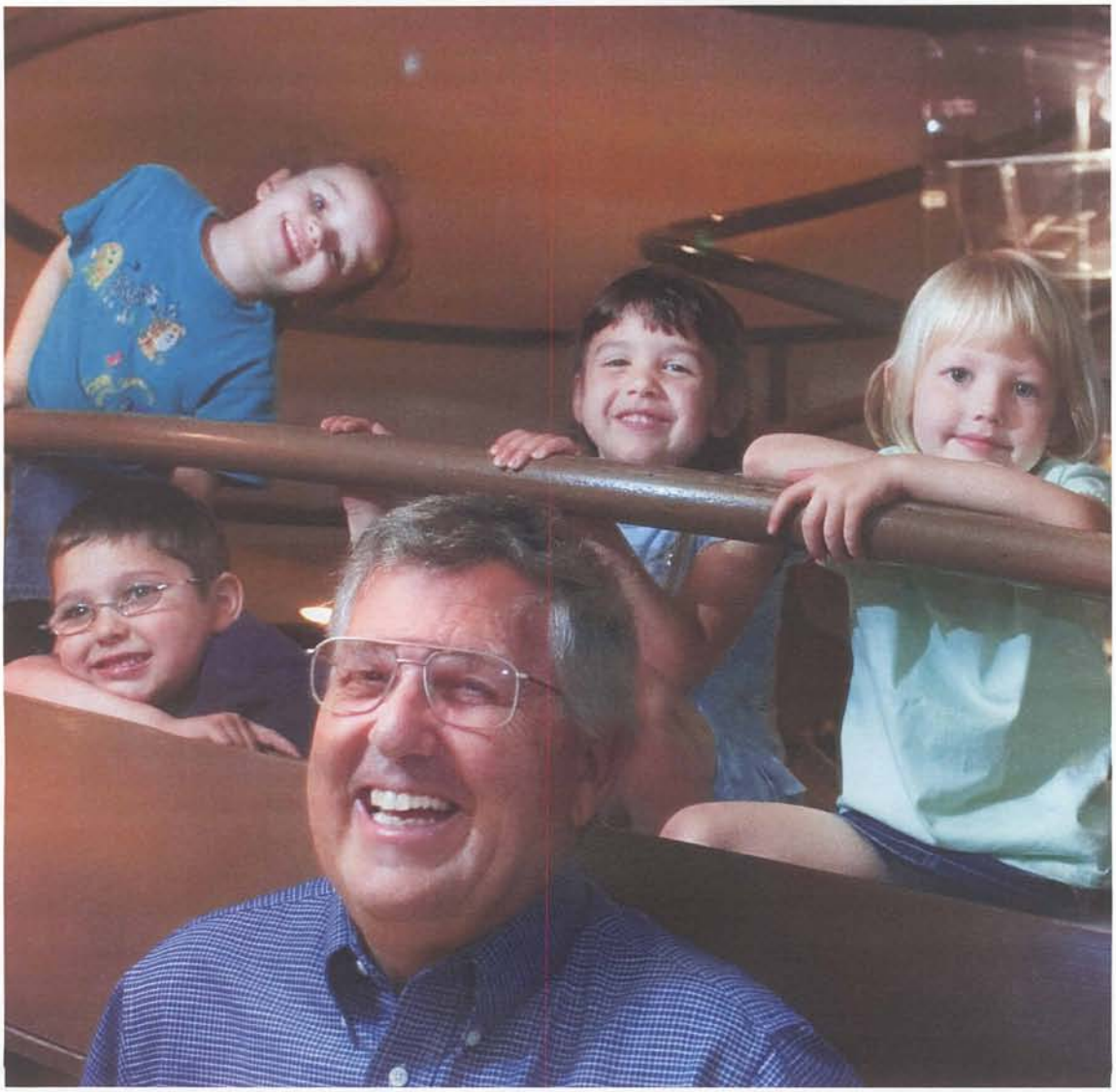
As a result of community efforts, many providers have earned higher ratings—which translates to more early learning environments and more opportunities for parental involvement in their children's daily care.

Volunteerism Supports Young Children

Local institutions and civic clubs, government organizations and concerned individuals have much to contribute to their communities' focus on young children.

Libraries, public schools, civic groups and higher education entities have offered their facilities, encouraged their constituents to read to children in child care facilities and promoted book drives.

- United Way has supplied funding, leadership and other resources.
- Rotary clubs have committed money and time to improve child care facilities in low-income areas and fund scholarships for child care teachers.
- Leaders in the banking and insurance industries have chaired, or served on, community Smart Start steering committees.
- Chambers of Commerce have advocated for early childhood with local business leaders, sometimes offering in-kind contributions.
- Universities have offered free English as a Second Language classes and provided student volunteers to promote early literacy.



- Career technology centers have sent child development students into classrooms to read to children. They have assigned woodworking students to build shelves in child care facilities and automotive students to repair vans used to transport children.
- Libraries have expanded their summer reading programs to include younger children.
- Hospitals and universities have partnered to provide newborn screening for all infants born in their communities.
- And retirees, individually and in groups, have devoted untold hours reading to young children in a variety of settings.

Public Officials Lead Public Support

Mayors and other elected officials have helped several Oklahoma cities become more family-friendly environments in which their youngest citizens can thrive. They have declared monthly reading days, when parents, teachers and caregivers throughout the community are urged to read with a child. They have also worked collaboratively with local governments to expand learning opportunities for pre-kindergarten children.

Oklahoma First Lady Kim Henry has visibly supported school readiness, invigorating communities, encouraging volunteers and rewarding community efforts.

Sharing of Best Practices

Not every Smart Start Oklahoma community has all of these activities...yet. But when something productive happens in one place, it is shared with leaders in other communities for possible replication.

Smart Start is not a program or layer of bureaucracy. It is not a directive imposed upon communities from distant centers of government. Smart Start Oklahoma is a network of individuals, organizations and state agencies committed to improving the school readiness of all of Oklahoma's children.

Taking root from within individual communities and gaining support from public and private partners statewide, Smart Start Oklahoma is the sum total of:

- Committed efforts of concerned citizens
- Creative local approaches to problem-solving
- Collaboration between diverse service providers
- Collaboration between public and private partners
- Continuous focus on enriching the experience of early childhood

It is a workable, practical solution that already has accomplished a great deal and promises to do much more in the future, as new communities form and mature communities expand their service areas.

But the real benefits will emerge when children from these mobilized communities arrive at school prepared to learn and grow into productive, self-sufficient Oklahomans.

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