

Chapter 5

The Community Perspective



Public Officials

The Greater Waco Community Education Summit is an initiative that is guided and supported wholeheartedly by the Mayor of Waco, Ms. Virginia Dupuy. A leader of intense passion engaged in efforts for the children of McLennan County, it became readily apparent from her interview that she appreciates the importance and the vulnerability of early childhood. However, when asked, “Does the *community* understand the link between education, the home and community, nutrition, health care, safety, behavior and social development?” her eyes lit up and she exclaimed, “That’s the question that I have been looking for to put to this community!”

A wide range of issues face this community and its efforts to

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advance early childhood education in McLennan County. Safety, health care, education, child care, transportation, employment and economics are all factors that have significant ramifications related to

“the question”. Over several months in 2009, many issues related to early care and education were discussed with local public officials.

During this series of interviews, each official for the city and the county showed their own unique passion through their replies to our questions. Despite the fact that each held a greater familiarity with the constituency that they represented, they did recognize that certain areas of the city and county faced greater challenges and had particular needs over other areas, i.e. East Waco.

Economics:

Many of the officials expressed great concern about poverty and the economics that seem to drive most decisions about children, families and the community. They feared the growing unemployment and underemployment and its effect on family income. The economy has forced families to make decisions about where to live, how much to spend and the impact on the sale of their existing homes. Additionally, the downturn in the economy has coincided with the increased number of clients seeking health services from the Department of Public Health and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program.

At the community level, economics similarly drives what initiatives can legitimately be pursued. For example, efforts to expand the number of pre-kindergarten spaces available in the city of Waco will be dependent upon the availability of additional funds. Similarly, expansion of mass transit services across the city of Waco and the region will also be dependent upon the availability of additional transit funding despite the growing need for services.

Crime and Safety:

Public safety is a concern that weighs heavily on the mind of most public officials. Local officials similarly expressed concerns over crime and safety in the community, recognizing the impact that violence and trauma can have on the healthy growth and development of a child. Each area of McLennan County and Waco faces issues related to safety and security that are as unique as the area itself. The officials interviewed voiced their concerns over crime and safety and the regional differences. For example, manufacturing of methamphetamines are more of a concern in the rural areas of McLennan County than within the municipalities.

The crime concerns that most impact the youngest population involves violence in the home; child abuse/neglect and domestic violence. In some neighborhoods, community violence significantly impacts how children are raised and the limitations to

their activities. Interviews with the McLennan County Sheriff, Larry Lynch, and the Chief of Police for Waco, Brent Stroman, reflected the concerns each had about the youth of this region. These two officials, leaders of the largest law enforcement agencies in McLennan County, expressed concerns about conditions at home and in the community and the impact that each has upon a child's healthy growth and development.

Chief Stroman indicated that the Waco Police Department has taken steps to reduce child abuse and domestic violence related crimes which directly impact young children and are more prevalent in some communities over others. Exposure to these conditions can be a contributing factor to the increased rates of youth crime, teen pregnancies, substance abuse and the high school dropout rate seen in communities. Both law enforcement officials recognized each of these consequences and indicated that their agencies had witnessed increases in the prevalence of these events in the community, which are factors that influence staffing needs for law enforcement.

Both expressed concerns about youth violence and drug abuse. Jail and prison populations are growing as the number and intensity of crimes is on the rise. More and more, parents are taken from the home for crimes committed. Increasingly, grandparents are raising their grandchildren. Chief Stroman expressed concerns over an increased gang presence, a concern that worsens when children are left unsupervised.

The impact of safety related issues upon children is not lost upon the public officials that were interviewed. Chief Stroman's comment, "We try to stay connected with the kids. These are our future," reflects the views of the officials and other members of the community. "This age group – young kids – it's important to get them off to a good start," summarizes the feelings of many throughout the county who work with young children.

Parental and community involvement:

Hectic schedules, job and family responsibilities, and single parent households are a few of the reasons that parents are not more involved with their children and their education. Many of the officials interviewed cited a lack of parental involvement as a concern that has influenced the development of the children in McLennan County. Officials, both elected and appointed, expressed concerns about parental involvement in the education and rearing of their children, indicating that the parents' involvement is important, yet it has room for improvement.



There currently exist a number of individuals and agencies that are involved on a daily basis, but the entire community needs to take an active role in the process of caring for the children and families. Ultimately, the support of family, friends and community members may influence the young children to strive for success in school and eventually continue to a post secondary education. The success in school may ultimately lead to improved employment opportunities, higher wages and less dependence on government support.

Education:

Many of the public officials of McLennan County and the city of Waco who were interviewed recognized the importance of early childhood education and the impact that quality programs can have on a child's capacity to learn and achieve academic success.

These officials also recognize that early education must be a cooperative effort between the parents and the community and that the “silo” mentality is no longer an option for communities to be effective.

Educating the young is a complex process with many challenges that impact effectiveness. The superintendent for the Waco Independent School District, Dr. Roland Hernandez, indicated that the community faces three main challenges: 1) Lack of exposure for the children, 2) large population of English Language Learners who are living in extreme poverty, and 3) lack of parental support of the school. Dr. Hernandez, like other public officials, recognizes that some neighborhoods face greater challenges over others. For example, East and South Waco because of the high number of low-income families and English Language Learners.

Dr. Hernandez described changes of the early education efforts (public school pre-kindergarten) from its early stages toward a “home campus” approach for the children and their families. He indicated that pre-k services on public school campuses are at maximum capacity yet are funded to provide full day services. This district, like others in McLennan County and across the state, face challenges to early education that involves the growth of the program to offer services to more children while meeting the unique language and cultural needs of the community. The Superintendent recognizes that there exists an imbalance between need and capacity, even with the assistance of partner organizations in the community.

Today, early education services with the Waco ISD (pre-kindergarten) are very popular despite the increased availability of private school programs which have built up in recent years. The district enjoys collaborative relationships with many early childhood organizations such as AVANCE in Waco, Montessori schools and local Head Start programs that support the early childhood efforts in McLennan County.

However, a significant challenge exists when attempting to engage parents toward greater involvement with their child's school. Many parents appear disinterested, a perception that may be fostered by the parents' work schedule and responsibilities to other siblings in the home. Similar concerns were expressed by members of the Waco City Council who recognized the importance of parental support to their child's education and development.

To meet the growing needs of the county's young children, the head of the largest school district in McLennan County, Waco Independent School District (WISD) has a vision that can help all children succeed. It begins by eliminating the mindset that low-income and ELL families are destined to continue the cycle and expanding early childhood education programs. Further, year round programs will help to meet student needs. They will grow the support of the community, including parents, for public schools with a broad sense of shared responsibility for the child well-being. Ultimately, the Superintendent's vision may be realized.

Public Health:

The Department of Public Health for McLennan County delivers approximately 15 to 16 thousand units of service each year to approximately 12 thousand individual clients. The interview with the Director of Public Health and his staff regarding health care for the young children and their families proved to be insightful. The general perception of the department is that the overall health of children and families is okay. Further, the department is committed to improving the public health through prevention efforts that focus on many common health conditions that include nutrition and obesity, infant care, pregnancy and childbirth, immunizations, asthma and diabetes. However, the Director recognizes that these efforts will require this community working together.

Many of the pressing health care concerns that are seen in McLennan County are the focus of education and awareness

efforts designed to prevent the development of the health conditions before they occur. Parents are engaged in these efforts and educated about appropriate prevention techniques and responses to illness.

Nutrition for young children that can prevent the development of obesity is a key concern of local, state and national health care officials. Parents are provided information about breastfeeding and the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program.

Other programs stress the importance of immunizations and preventing disease. Parents are taught about when to vaccinate their children. Immunizations are encouraged and then made available for low or no cost to families.

This department is also engaged in efforts to reduce the teen pregnancy rate in McLennan County (Section 2.1) through effective education programs. The department is also providing information to women who give birth about brain development, an effort that is in need of additional resources for expansion. Local public health officials are also very concerned about the lack of health insurance for many of the adults and children in McLennan County.

The health of the adult population greatly influences the care that young children receive. The Department of Public Health is actively engaged in efforts to reduce the incidence of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and dual diagnoses of mental health and substance abuse. Further, concerns about homelessness and literacy are prominent in the work of the public health professionals in McLennan County.

Ultimately, each of these factors, in conjunction with the home environment, contributes to the growth and development of the very young children in McLennan County. Improvements to the health conditions of the adult and child population in the county has the potential to positively impact a young child's capacity and desire to learn.

Transportation:

One of the many challenges facing families in McLennan County is the availability of convenient, affordable transportation. The Waco Transit Director indicated that his office recognizes the challenges that low-income parents and families face and is looking to address these concerns. He is very cognizant of the challenges of a working parent to deliver a child to a care facility, get to work and return in time to take the child home. In order to address this concern, the Director is exploring the feasibility of a child care facility adjacent to the new transit center which would be available to residents of the community and transit employees and reduce the time lost in transit and at work.

The system in McLennan County is designed to offer ready access to health care, shopping, employment and child care services while minimizing the walking distance to designated stops along the transit routes. Most of the equipment currently in service is new or will be replaced by the end of 2009.

The challenges facing families include concerns about convenience, especially for parents with young children. Bus service along a route occurs only once every hour and service ends by 7:15 PM. No service is available on Sunday. Plans to expand services are under development but will require additional funding for staff and equipment.

Public Officials:

The comments derived from the interviews of the officials in McLennan County and the city of Waco addressed many of the factors that are most influential to the overall growth and development of young children. Their candid viewpoints are consistent with the results of the data analysis described earlier in this report. In the next section (5.2), the views of the service providers, educators and non-profit service providers are examined and summarized for consideration.

Caregivers and Providers

Early in the project, it was decided to look beyond the data towards the policy makers, service providers and the service recipients. In this second phase of the qualitative study, the research team has sought the opinions of the service providers. A series of surveys, interviews and focus groups were conducted to gather this information.

In any given community, there are groups of individuals who have dedicated themselves to the service of their community and its residents. These individuals may be first responders such as the police and fire fighters or Emergency Medical Services (EMS) professionals. They could also be health care providers, social service workers, educators, child care providers or clergy members. Each of these individuals, by the very nature of their work, has a perspective that is often shaped by their encounters with the people that they serve. This section continues the synthesis of information begun in Section 5.1 and looks to the people who choose to serve their neighbors in McLennan County.

McLennan County Non-profit Survey

Twenty four responses were received from an online survey distributed to local nonprofit organizations. Their responses reflected similar concerns to those of the public officials. Half of the respondents indicated that their focus was upon a specific neighborhood or areas of the city. The agencies served the terminally ill, homeless, impoverished, hungry, elderly and members of the community with special needs. 2 of 3 agencies indicated that they currently provide services to more than 1,000 people in McLennan County yet feel that there is such need that they could serve in excess of 2,500 people in McLennan County.

Caregivers and Providers

The focus of the survey shifted towards the needs of children and families. Family stability (87%), health care needs (78.3%) and child maltreatment (60.9%) were identified as the top three issues facing children (ages 0-5) in McLennan County. Further, over half of the responses (56.5%) identified available education as a key issue. Barriers to meeting the needs related to health and education included a range of responses. However, three issues dominated the responses: Family stability (>90%), poverty (>80%) and low parental involvement (>80%). When asked to identify the single barrier that most influenced the early childhood education efforts in McLennan County, responses primarily centered upon low parental involvement (39.1%) and poverty (30.4%), concerns repeatedly raised during interviews with the public officials.

Throughout the survey, collaboration was a message that continually appeared in the responses. When the survey turned to specific inquiries about issues related to children and families in the community, the responses continued the theme of community collaboration and support. Responses to the question “What do you see as the strengths of this community for children and families?” again centered upon community participation and collaboration. 11 of 16 responses to the survey identified collaboration as a strength of the McLennan County community, stressing the compassion and involvement of this community in its care of the child and family. There is strong support among the respondents to promote parental involvement and to do this in an organized, focused effort. Responses suggested that focused efforts needed community involvement to address the challenges facing children and families related to education issues (including higher education).

When asked to identify the public services that could enhance the quality of life for children and families, health care (87.5%), parks (83.3%), libraries (79.2%), affordable after school programs and summer care programs for children (79.2%), public transportation (75.0%) and public safety (66.7%) were the most frequently identified services. Respondents believed that the community

could undertake initiatives that could improve the quality of life for children and families.

Suggested efforts looked to activities that include engaging adults (parents, in particular), having programs that perform effectively, addressing issues related to poverty and unemployment, supporting the stabilization of the family, providing facilities and parks for families all the while engaging the entire community. For example, an effort to address the education concerns facing this area began last year with the first of five Education Summits convened by the Mayor. Twenty of twenty four respondents to this survey indicated that they were aware of the Mayor's initiative to improve education in Waco. Still, only 13 of 24 attended the Education Summit in 2008.

Finally, the closing remarks of eight respondents indicated an area of concern for the community. In spite of a perception among the respondents that there exists an atmosphere of cooperation and partnership within the community, there also exists a perception that portions of the community were being marginalized. The concerns about the elderly, minority populations, marginalized neighborhoods that have feel they "no voice", and Waco ISD are prominent among the nonprofit survey responses.

Clergy Focus Group

In early September, a focus group of clergy members from different churches and denominations met to share their opinions about this community, its children and families. The clergy members examined a broad range of topics related to early childhood, stable families and the community.

At the start, the clergy members were asked to state what they considered to the current living conditions for young children and their families in McLennan County. The responses reflected the characteristics of the congregations that they served. Each member of the focus group indicated that they saw economics as a significant concern in the community affecting some families

more than others. They indicated that lower socioeconomic status, Hispanic families are experiencing great difficulties. However, it is not exclusive to this specific segment of the population. Single mothers are feeling a great financial burden brought on by the downturn in the economy and the changes in family structure. One member also indicated that their middle class congregants are “living on the margin”.

Family dynamics and functionality is also a concern. Many young parents lack the skills to effectively parent and families do not enjoy a solid structure. This stress, coupled with the economic downturn, may be contributing to the changes in the family. Isolated incidents of family violence and child abuse have been discovered among the families that these ministers serve. There are also a number of families seeking assistance to meet their unmet needs. In some cases, families are turning to the church in the community to fill their unmet needs and the churches have responded by offering emergency funds for their congregation and people off the street. Some churches have established food banks which are supported by volunteers. Some families are turning to grandparents and their extended families for assistance.

In order to explore the level of understanding about environmental factors, early childhood education, and academic success, the ministers were asked “the question”, namely, “Do you understand the link between environment and child outcomes?” The ministers related different levels of understanding of this relationship. However, their level of understanding indicated that they each had a solid grasp on the link between early childhood experiences and a child’s academic success. Some of the ministers have done their own research in an effort to educate themselves about the relationship between the early years and academic success.

The ministers indicated that they have made attempts to use the knowledge and implement efforts that specifically focus on these issues. The efforts that they reported include work with Head

Start, child abuse organizations and fatherhood initiatives. The clergy members reported that their churches also understand the link and support efforts to impact the children through early childhood education and offer initiatives that include pre-kindergarten and other formal education efforts. One congregation has made efforts to enlighten the parents and congregation through awareness.

When asked to elaborate on the strengths of the community, the primary response from each of the ministers was related to the community's support of the needy and collaborative efforts to meet those needs. Local non-profits and churches consistently work together in Waco, and the churches provide a lot of financial support. Specific examples to this point include the Mission Waco school supply store and health fairs for immunizations. They also cited efforts to reduce poverty in McLennan County. Despite the efforts, they also recognize that there are limitations in each community because of the community's size and limited resources.

For the future, the ministers indicated that early childhood efforts in Waco and McLennan County will need more parental involvement and adult role models to support the positive changes that are sought. The ministers expressed hope that efforts such as the Mayor's Education Summit will bring the faith-based and education sectors together. Building relationships with families must be a priority before change can come to education, poverty and ending reliance on services. Male parents must take a more active role in the home. Mentoring programs in the schools working with at risk children may also prove helpful.

Educators Survey

In May 2009, an electronic survey was distributed to public school elementary teachers asking for information about McLennan County pre-kindergarten services. The overall goal of the survey was to solicit input regarding the strengths and challenges facing the early education efforts in McLennan County. 35 surveys were

completed from eight school districts with Waco ISD completing the majority of the replies (51.4%). Thirty three (94.3%) of the responses were completed by classroom teachers who were mostly pre-k teachers. All of the respondents indicated that their districts offer full day pre-k programs.

Responses to the survey regarding the strengths of the early education efforts in McLennan County revealed that the respondents regarded faculty involvement in the education process is the greatest strength of the early childhood education system. Open ended comments received with the responses described the professionals in the classroom as highly talented and educated “quality” teachers who exhibit a high degree of dedication and initiative in their efforts to educate these very young children. They further described a group of professionals willing to work together to accomplish the teaching goals, assist new teachers and offer support to each other. The teachers strive to build academic and social skills in their young students. Further, more than 2 out of 3 responses view the leadership in the school as a strength of the system of early education.

However, responses to this question were less favorable when consideration was given to the availability of resources, parental and community support. Less than half of the responses received indicated that parental involvement, neighborhood factors or resources from the community could be considered strengths of this community in support of the early education. The perceived lack of support and parental involvement was reinforced by statements made by the respondents that included “more parental and school support”, “We need to continue to promote parental involvement”, “More resources available for students”, and “More parental involvement and support from the faculty for misbehavior”.

Ultimately, the professionals that provide the early education services in McLennan County, the classroom teachers, strongly endorse the benefits of and need for quality, early childhood education of the youngest members of the community. They toil

long hours, are committed to the children in their care and make the best of the limited resources that are given to them. Their dedication, professionalism and concern for the children were best summarized with the statement “All the teachers in this school really care about the welfare of the children. They are dedicated to their work and making the future generation prepared for all aspects of life.”

Health Care Services

Dr. Tim Barker, Medical Director with the McLennan County Family Health Center was interviewed about health care for lower socioeconomic status families. Dr. Barker was asked to discuss the clinic services, families that utilize the services of the clinic, health care related issues that most impact children, and challenges to health care access for the children and their families

The McLennan County Family Health Center is a network of healthcare facilities throughout McLennan County that provides services to more than 42,000 residents including 1,600 births per year. The system provides primary care, not specialized care. Across the county, more than 95,000 people are eligible for services because they make less than 200% of the federal poverty level.

The system, which was established in 1970 and grew to its current capacity with 11 clinics, 36 family practice residents and 400 staff, has recently been awarded additional funding to expand the number of clinic sites and streamline their electronic record keeping system. The facilities fill the health care needs of the community, a community that is without a county hospital. The clinic has developed a broad network of partners in education, child care and nonprofit services. Working with their partners, the clinic offers immunizations in local schools, behavioral and mental health services, and dental care.

McLennan County, like counties across the state and the country, faces a number of critical issues that impact the health care

delivery system. Rising medical costs coupled with diminishing funding for primary care, dental and mental health care, hospitalization and specialty care needs have put limits on the amount of service that can be offered and created a concern for the overall population. Transportation for children and adults limits access to health care for many residents.

The services offered for behavioral / psychiatric health care for adults and children have experienced cutbacks in Mental Health and Mental Retardation (MHMR) funding. Children are seeking care with increasing frequency for symptoms indicative of depression, oppositional defiant disorder, Attention deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). There is an increase in the incidence of substance abuse and the health consequences that are frequently seen with use of cocaine, alcohol, tobacco, methamphetamines, and marijuana. Many children are seen with asthma symptoms, and teen pregnancy (often to teen parents with multiple children) is higher than the national and state rates.

Additional challenges to the delivery of health care services also exist in McLennan County. Many adults and children alike lack health care insurance, restricting access to many health care options. Language barriers with clients that speak limited English have placed a challenge on the overall system of health care delivery. Many patients lack reading skills, limiting the ability to raise the awareness of the community about critical health care issues including pregnancy, adequate prenatal care and immunization of young children.

When queried about the link between early childhood education and health, Dr. Barker cited examples of efforts within the community that are specifically addressing related concerns. The clinic has a staff psychiatrist that is working with families and the psychosocial issues prevalent at home including autism and autism spectrum disorder. Patients are routinely screened for domestic violence and abuse and cultural differences in health care needs such as those seen in African American mothers who

breastfeed with a frequency that is lower than any other sociocultural group.

The future of the Family Health Center and healthcare in McLennan County includes efforts that will benefit the community. An expansion of the clinics will increase capacity. Health education outreach through programs such as AmeriCorps, as well as efforts to expand health literacy, will educate the community and professionals to address pressing health care concerns such as the current obesity epidemic.

Caregivers and Providers

In addition to the classroom teachers who completed the online survey, child care providers and Head Start teachers also shared their comments and perspectives about the children of McLennan County and their needs. These professionals are actively engaged in efforts to care for the members of the community that are most in need. Their candid viewpoints, much like those of the public officials, are consistent with the results of the data analysis described earlier in this report.

The early education professionals spoke of the poverty that many of these children faced every day and the difficulties of working with the parents who faced many personal challenges with their own education, employment, substance abuse and legal problems. Many families struggled with language barriers that often prevented the families from accessing services that would benefit the families and their children.

In their facilities, the professionals, many of whom were directors, spoke of the budgetary constraints that prevented them from paying for needed staff, services, equipment and facilities. These constraints prevented them from serving all of the clients that were in need, many of whom had pronounced needs for mental health, education and medical care.

Yet, these professionals persevered despite the limitations they faced every day. They felt very strongly about the dedication of

their staff. They felt deep care for the children and their families and firmly believed that their work was important and effective. They were constantly examining ways to improve with the ultimate goal in mind being the preparation of the children to learn and be prepared to do well in school.

Another early education partners within the community were the Head Start providers. 12 sites are in operation in McLennan County and the city of Waco (Waco ISD). Interviews with the Director of Head Start services in McLennan County and the Waco Independent School District (Waco ISD) provided insights into the comprehensive efforts that cover health, mental health and encouraged parent / grandparent involvement.

Staff members of the Head Start programs (teachers) are required to hold a minimum of a CDA degree, a clear difference from other providers in the community. The more stringent educational requirements for Head Start teachers is a mandate of the Head Start program. Currently, over half of the Head Start teachers hold an Associates Degree in Waco with 25% either holding or pursuing a Bachelor's Degree. Head Start teachers must complete 40 hours of pre-service training and 34 hours of annual in-service training.

With the expanded staff training requirements of Head start, more opportunities are provided to meet the annual training needs. Each year, many staff training opportunities for Head Start providers are opened to child care providers in the community. The training is done from a pool of resources that is budgeted for each year.

Finally, when asked about the strengths of the Head Start programs in the community, the responses focused upon the collaboration between the Waco Independent School District, Head Start and child care providers, the credentials and training of the Head Start staff, the holistic approach to the education of the eligible children to include health and safety/well being and a research based curriculum that is offered to the children.

Many services are offered to the children and families through the diverse programs in McLennan County. In the next section, parents and grandparents were asked to share their candid viewpoints on the services for their children. In the next section, the results of those focus groups are discussed.





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Parents and Grandparents

Researchers analyze data and draw conclusions. In some cases, they discuss issues with other professionals and hope that the shared perspectives corroborate the data. Too many times, researchers fail to ask the people who can shed the most light on a subject for their input.

In order to avoid this, parents and grandparents were invited to share their opinions about the issues that are most important as they attempt to raise their children and grandchildren. A series of focus groups were held to ask the primary caregivers about the challenges they face each day raising a young child. In particular, the groups were asked about accessibility and costs of child care, what they liked and disliked about the services and what could be done to improve the system.

Five focus groups were conducted with parents and grandparents. The participants were from different areas of Waco and McLennan County representing different socioeconomic status groups and ethnic groups. The focus groups were conducted at local child care facilities and nonprofit organizations. Each group brought a different perspective dependent upon the program that they were involved with.

Despite the differences in the perspectives, the parents and grandparents were open and candid in their responses to our questions about child care in McLennan County. And, in each of the groups, the topics invariably turned to issues that included:

-  Quality of care and education
-  Availability
-  Affordability

- ✚ Transportation
- ✚ Safety
- ✚ Policy issues in each facility

An overriding theme for each of these focus groups was quality of care for their children and grandchildren. These parents and grandparents were not looking for a site to merely place their children for the day; they were looking for services that offered well trained staff who could deliver a structured curriculum that challenged the children intellectually and socially. They looked for programs that could teach their children the fundamentals of reading and math so that they would be ready for the rigors of education when they began kindergarten and first grade. Some parents spoke of encounters with facilities that would “care” for a child by placing them in front of a television set for hours at a time and offer little interaction.

Parents and grandparents looked for facilities that were clean, well-equipped and had adequate staff available for education and care of the children. They wanted their children to be safe, to know that the staff and any others that come into contact with their children had been thoroughly screened through background checks and were trained about child safety. Many cited concerns about communication between parents and program staff, in particular about the progress of their children, reenrollment and availability of space for coming years.

Availability of services was repeatedly a topic of discussion in each group. The parents and grandparents talked of their search for “quality” programs that they could trust. Many were confused about where to find good care for their children or grandchildren and often turned to friends and relatives for recommendations about services in the county. For some, the recommendations did not prove beneficial as the quality of the care was below the standards that they sought. In many cases, they found a service

that they felt would offer quality care but all of the slots were filled. Some parents waited for a space to open, sometimes waiting for years to enroll their child in the program of choice. Others were not able to wait for the space to open and had to compromise on less than ideal arrangements because of employment.

Some of the parents spoke of policy concerns that posed a challenge to their ability to enroll the child in a program. For many families who are low-income and employed in low paying positions, the hours of operation for the facilities is a concern. Some programs were very rigid in their adherence to the hours of operation and any deviation by a parent, for whatever reason, could result in the loss of the space for the child. Parents who rely on public transportation reported that they must adjust their work schedule around the bus schedules in order to get their children before the facility closes.

The parents and grandparents, many of whom were from low-income families with limited resources, were aware of the need for affordable services. For many of the parents, the care of their child was subsidized. These parents had encountered situations where they were denied assistance because of their income. In some cases, the parents and grandparents had to settle for a program of slightly lower quality to be able to afford care. Even families that were not considered low-income, possibly lower-middle income and thus ineligible for subsidized care, struggled to afford the quality of care that was foremost in their minds. The families in each group spoke to a need for more facilities that offer affordable quality care for their children.

These groups of parents and grandparents expressed strong desire to have their children in programs with an emphasis on education. They spoke of the need for their children to be prepared for school, to learn the alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes and fundamentals of reading. For many of these caregivers, they had been successful in their search and were very pleased with the progress of their children to date. They felt that trained teachers and assistants who developed relationships with the children were most effective in the classroom. In addition, the parents recognized the need for technology support of the programs in the form of computers and equipment.

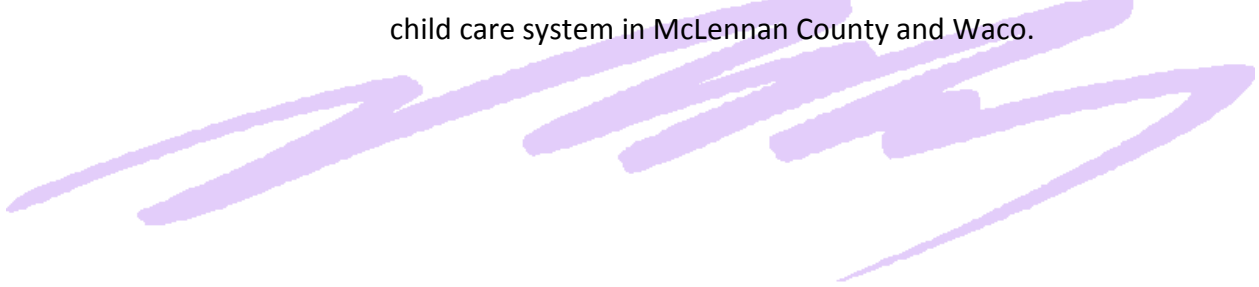
In addition to the challenges of work, transportation, income, availability of services, the grandparents in these groups presented with a unique set of challenges. Those that were in attendance at the focus groups had taken on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. They spoke to difficulties in getting help from the parents of the grandchild; their own children. They sensed that they were on their own because there are few programs available to assist the grandparents. Further, they are unaware of the existing programs that are available to help them. In many cases, grandparents do not have legal guardianship of the children and are limited in their abilities to make decisions that affect the children.

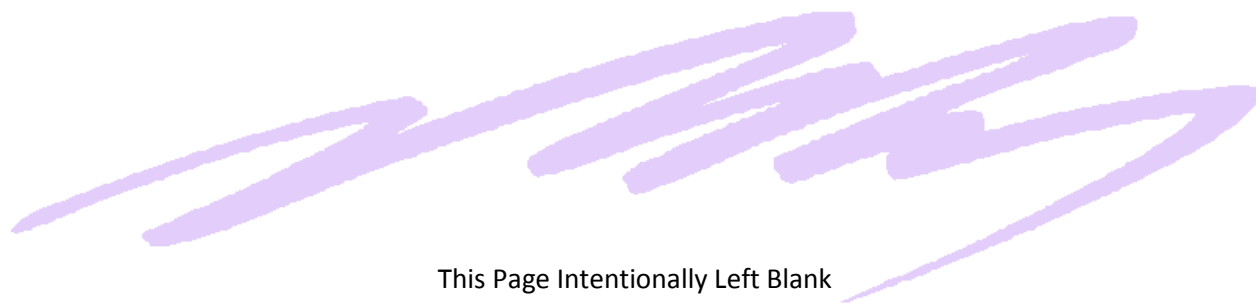
Despite the challenges, the parents and grandparents spoke highly of the programs that they were involved with. Local programs such as the Grandparents as Parents Program, Avance, Parents as Teachers, and the Piper Center for Family Studies at Baylor were held in high esteem because of the quality of care that they provided to the children.

The parents and grandparents also spoke of the advances that their children had made since they became involved with their respective programs. The children had made advances in their reading skills, ability to count to 10 and 20, knowledge of the alphabet, colors and social skills. The parents attributed these advances to the guidance of the program staff.

The parents spoke highly of their own interaction and education they received from the programs. The parents and grandparents were very interested and engaged in the efforts of the programs to educate them about the care of the child. Further, they expressed their satisfaction with the programs and the efforts to involve them in the education and care of their children.

Finally, the parents indicated that they would like to see efforts made to address the issues that were discussed regarding affordability, availability and center policies. They would like to see more training for the teachers, better equipment and structured curriculum for their children. These changes would be on their “wish list” of changes that could be made to improve the child care system in McLennan County and Waco.





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