

2009 CHILDHOOD

QUALITY of LIFE

INDEX

McLennan County, Texas



WACO FOUNDATION

Texas Early
Childhood
Education
Coalition

TECEC

Foreword

In early 2009, the Waco Foundation commissioned a study of the early childhood needs and resources for McLennan County. The Foundation selected the Austin based Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition (TECEC) to conduct the study. Since early February, TECEC has gathered and analyzed information about key issues surrounding the early childhood movement in Waco and the surrounding cities. The year-long effort has examined conditions in McLennan County that, potentially, can influence the growth, development and education of very young children. The two part study is a comprehensive project that combined a quantitative analysis of existing data sets with a qualitative assessment of input from members of the community.

The study that was done on behalf of the Waco community has been more than an exercise in data collection and analysis. This study was also built upon input from members of the community who were active contributors and played a key role in shaping the look of the study. The community's interest provided the impetus for the second part to the study that looked more closely at the needs for early childhood services and education throughout McLennan County.

The efforts of TECEC and the community are responsible for the creation of the Quality of Life Index. The Index matrix is an adaptation of a similar model, created by the researchers at the J. MacDonald Williams Institute (Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas). The model, entitled "Childhood Well-Being in Dallas County" was created for use as a tool to identify areas of Dallas County where challenges exist that can have significant influence upon the growth, development, health and education of the children.

This modification was developed to be specific to the 0 to 5 population in McLennan County. Specific factors were selected, many of which were used for the Dallas report. However, because of the specific focus of this report, additional factors more pertinent to the 0-5 age group were selected. This report was also organized differently than the Dallas report to reflect the layers of influence upon the narrow age group that is the focus of the report. The "Sphere of Influence" described in the report looks at three areas of influence; factors that directly impact the child, family factors and community factors.

Over the past 12 months, more than 1400 hours have been spent in the preparation of this report. Two dozen interviews of elected officials, leaders in health care, law enforcement and education, and service providers were conducted. Online surveys were used to gather input from professional educators. Finally, more than a half dozen focus groups with parents, grandparents and clergy members rounded out the input from the community. It is the hope of the TECEC Research team and the Waco Foundation that the year-long study has produced results that will stimulate discussion and call the community to action. We are pleased to be able to share the results of this work with the McLennan County community.

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2009 Childhood Quality of Life Index

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Special Thanks

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Waco City Council
Office of the Chief of Police, City of Waco
McLennan County Sheriff's Department
Education Service Center, Region 12
Community of Churches, McLennan County
Family Health Centers, McLennan County
Waco Independent School District
Greater Waco Chamber of Commerce
Waco Transit System
McLennan County Parents and Grandparents
McLennan County Child Care Providers
McLennan County Head Start Providers
Residents of McLennan County

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Introduction

The Childhood Quality of Life Index: McLennan County Context, Purpose and Framework

In a late 1990's national survey of 3,500 kindergarten teachers, 46% of teachers reported that at least half of their students were having problems following directions due to poor academic skills or problems with working in groups.ⁱ Since the survey, great advances in our understanding of the effects of genetics, environment, health and safety upon the development of a child leading up to the first day of school have been made. Researchers from around the world have shown that tens of thousands of events and interactions between a child and others can shape a child and significantly influence that child's potential for success in many areas of life including academics.

Studies also find that at least half of the educational achievement gaps between poor and non-poor children exist when the child enters kindergarten.

Studies have also found that at least half of the educational achievement gaps between poor and non-poor children exist when the child enters kindergarten.ⁱⁱ The need for attention is critical as a child who displays weak academic skills is less likely to succeed in the classroom. Several studies have focused on the impact of early childhood education interventions on children from low-income families. Studies have shown that many benefits are realized when disadvantaged children are engaged in quality early education programs. Children benefits include improved academic success, families are less dependent upon welfare programs and communities enjoy lower juvenile and adult crime rates.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, children reap the benefits of early education programs in the areas of health, social capital, and earning capacity.^{iv} Given the opportunity, early education programs can shape the learning, development, and long-term success for disadvantaged and at-risk children.

The National Education Goals Panel established its first National Education Goal in 1990, stating that by 2000, every child in the nation would start school ready to learn. In an effort to reach that

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goal, the panel focused on particular dimensions of school readiness: (1) physical well-being and motor development, (2) socio-emotional development, (3) approaches to learning, (4) language development, and (5) cognition and general knowledge.^v Together, these dimensions impact a child's ability to be school ready. To further capture the meaning of school readiness, early childhood leaders at the state and national level have also underlined a readiness equation: ready families, ready communities, ready services, and ready schools = children ready for school.^{vi} This equation emphasizes that in order for a child to be ready to learn, it takes the valued commitment and continued partnership of families, communities, and schools.

The purpose of this report is to examine the conditions in McLennan County that can influence a child's growth, development and education during the early childhood years, ages zero to five. The report, a balance between hard data (quantitative) and family and community perceptions (qualitative), is organized into sections with a focus upon the child, the family and the community.

This report is an effort to show the connection between the early childhood years and the integral role that families and the McLennan County community play in promoting the success of their youngest children. It is intended to serve as a guide to improvement of the lives of the children, the families and this community.

ⁱ Smith, J., Brooks-Gunn, J., and Klebanov, P. (1997). *Consequences of Growing Up Poor*, New York: Russell Sage.

ⁱⁱ Lee, V. and Burkham, D. (2002). *Inequality at the Starting Gate: School Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. www.epinet.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Barnett, S.W. (2008). *Preschool education and its lasting effects: Research and policy implications*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and Public Interest Center and Education Policy Research Unit. <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/preschool-education>

^{iv} Dickman, A., & Kovach, M. (2008). *Toward high quality early childhood education: An imperative for the regional economy*. Public Policy Forum, Inc.

^v *School Readiness: Helping Communities Get Children Ready for School and Schools Ready for Children* (Research Brief). Washington, DC: Child Trends. www.childtrends.org/schoolreadiness

^{vi} *National School Readiness Initiative: A 17 State Partnership*. (2005). Rhode Island: www.gettingready.org