

Executive Summary: Early Care and Education Parent Speak Outs & Employer Focus Groups 2017

In the spring of 2017, Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF) and WorkSource Montgomery (WSM) partnered to gather authentic voices from the community to inform their respective Early Care and Education (ECE) and Two-Generation Poverty research. The following report summarizes the findings of community speak outs held between April and June 2017 to collect input from both parents and employers.

Executive Summary

In general, parents raised concerns about affordability, flexibility, and convenience surrounding their ECE decisions. In general, employers and business leaders focused on the importance of recruiting and retaining employees and that the high cost of living in Montgomery County, included ECE costs, would jeopardize their ability to attract and retain good employees.

The finding of this report will be submitted to both WSM and MMF. WSM intends to use these findings to support the development of a Two-Generation model for aligning ECE and Workforce Development in Montgomery County. MMF intends to use these findings in its Call to Action in early 2018 for a system of ECE in Montgomery County.

Parent Speak Outs

Parent speak outs were designed to be less structured than focus groups. The goal was to give voice to and gain input from a diverse cross-section of parents of young children in Montgomery County. In collaboration with existing community groups, six speak outs were held with parents of young children between April and June 2017.

Parent Concerns: Affordability, Flexibility, Quality

The parents attending the speak outs expressed frustration with a lack of affordable, flexible options for ECE in Montgomery County.

- Several indicated that they left the workforce because the cost of childcare was either more than their paycheck or too large of a portion of it.
- Several left the workforce when they experienced a problem with the quality of the care their children received and were unable to secure alternative affordable and quality care.
- Several parents indicated using a complicated combination of center-based care, parents, friends, and relatives to care for their children when they were at work. This was especially true for parents who worked irregular or erratic shifts.
- Several parents experienced disruption in care when they lost fulltime employment and either they no longer had access to subsidized care or could no longer afford or find part-time care.

Overall, those parents who had access to Head Start and home visiting ECE programs were the most satisfied with their ECE arrangements and knowledgeable about their options. The few parents who were familiar with the concept of kindergarten readiness had older children who were already enrolled in the K-12 in the school system.

Considerations

In order to develop a system of affordable, flexible, quality ECE, parents stressed the need for incorporation of these considerations:

- The high cost of transportation, housing, and ECE and the need to address these challenges simultaneously
- Better information about how and where to find ECE
- Opportunities for affordable care for part-time work and during job search and training periods
- Flexible ECE options for early morning and late evening (and other nontraditional shifts)
- Easier and earlier access to subsidies for ECE
- ECE outreach during pregnancy and infancy

Employer Focus Groups

In May 2017, MMF and WSM facilitated three discussions among business leaders in Montgomery County. Participants were invited by members of the MMF Leadership Group or their contacts. The goal of the employer focus groups was to provide an opportunity for employers and business leaders to discuss the interplay of

workforce issues, including recruitment, retention, and workforce development within a successful ECE system. Participants were provided read ahead materials, resource links, and case study examples to foster a robust roundtable-style conversation.

Employer Concerns: Recruitment, Retention, Productivity

The employers and business leaders attending the focus group sessions were primarily concerned with employee recruitment, retention, and productivity both for the current workforce, and to a lesser degree, the future workforce.

The business leaders participating in the sessions were a self-selected group who had a better understanding of the Return on Investment for employers over time than the general employer pool. Therefore, the participants suggested a robust education and awareness campaign targeting the broader business community would be a vital first step. In particular, employers need to understand the ramifications of not investing in an ECE system.

The participants stressed the need to include all stakeholders in the development and financing of an ECE system. Business leaders recognized the inherent tension between quality, affordability, and availability.

Considerations

In order to incorporate all three characteristics into a proposed system, it must include:

- Strategies and incentives to propel more workers into the ECE system and keep them there.
- Strategies and incentives to provide high quality care.
- Strategies to incorporate ECE incentives as a part of a benefits and/or wellness package among larger employers.
- Strategies to encourage small businesses to take advantage of ECE friendly policies, like Dependent Care Assistance Programs (DCAP) and cooperative arrangements with other small businesses.