

# 'Our Children, Our Community, Our Future'

## Early Childhood Community Action in the WMRSD Communities



### **We heard from you!**

North Country Listens gathered input and action ideas from community members about how to make the region a great place for all children to live, learn, play and thrive. The Soup & Solutions Action Forum for early childhood on October 29, 2015 invited community members to identify and prioritize action ideas for addressing early childhood needs for young children and their families in the White Mountains Regional School District (WMRSD) communities. The following highlights the action ideas that rose to the top during the Action Forum. These action ideas will inform the WMRSD / SAU36, and its project partners, the Coös Coalition for Young Children and Families, and the Coös County Childcare Center Director Network, along with individual community members who are interested in taking action to improve early childhood opportunities for young children and families in the WMRSD communities.

### **Action Summary - these actions rose to the top:**

#### **Take action to communicate information about resources for early care and education:**

- *Create a centralized on-line information hub for early childhood resources in the area. Make it visually appealing and understandable. Connect all area resources to this centralized information hub, including town websites, SAU36 website, hospitals and doctor offices, libraries, religious centers.*
- *Offer parents training when enrolling children in Pre-K or Kindergarten to share information on resources and activities in the area.*
- *Educate high school students about child development, parent-child attachment, and the impact of drugs, alcohol, technology, neglect, toxic stress on early childhood.*

#### **Take action to strengthen connections and transitions from home to child care to pre-school and school:**

- *Create opportunities for people who work with young children to interact, collaborate, and visit other program sites and share school expectations.*
- *Increase postpartum and early home visits to actively support and connect parents to resources. Make home visits available through school age and connect with school district.*
- *Increase transportation options for all children between schools and childcare.*

#### **Take action as employers, businesses, and community leaders:**

- *Connect and communicate with businesses to make sure they understand the connection between supporting early childhood policies, education, and return on investment, including sponsorship of childcare enrollment or family activities.*
- *Provide free, high quality, age-appropriate, academic/enrichment based school programs to assist parents who cannot leave work at 3pm.*
- *Partner childcare centers with employment centers so childcare is close to work.*
- *Support grandparent involvement with children at the school and community level.*

#### **Take action to relieve toxic stress experienced by families:**

- *Utilize screening countywide in a variety of settings leading to earlier interventions with substance abuse in homes.*
- *Help all children have healthy food, snacks, fruits and veggies.*

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## **Project Overview:**

Over a six month period from spring to fall 2015, North Country Listens gathered input and action ideas from community members about how to make the region a great place for all children to live, learn, play and thrive. The Soup & Solutions Action Forum for early childhood invited community members to identify and prioritize action ideas for addressing early childhood needs for young children and their families. Action ideas were informed by input collected from community members from three community conversations held in the spring 2015 in Lancaster, Whitefield, and Jefferson, as well as outreach meeting with stakeholders from the business community, childcare providers, police, health, home visitors, and families conducted over the summer and early fall 2015. All project summary reports and handout materials can be found at <http://www.northcountrylistens.org/reports>.



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## **Community Input and Action Ideas:**

The following information reviews the themes heard during the community conversations and stakeholder meetings paired with the resulting action ideas from the Action Forum. We share a summary of action ideas generated by participants for each theme, many of which are included as actions that rose to top priority by participant interest and dot voting. All of the transcribed notes and action ideas are provided to the project team. The action ideas will inform WMRSD, its partners, and community members interested in implementing actions to address and improve early childhood for young children and families in the WMRSD communities.

### **Support for Young Children**

**Communicate Resources and Information to Families and Across Programs:** *Accessible information about resources; creative ways to connect parents and information; potential to reach every individual family with a newborn.*

Participants spoke of the need to create more accessible information about resources for families shared by school, parents, and community. This includes a current inventory of provider information, prenatal and early care resources, and gatherings or opportunities to connect with other parents for family activities and learning about early childhood development. Participants identified a need for more communication strategies, including resources on the school district website, social media, newspaper, and flyers.

### **Take action to communicate information about resources for early care and education:**

- Create a centralized on-line information hub for early childhood resources in the area. Make it visually appealing and understandable. Connect all area resources to this centralized information hub, including town websites, SAU36 website, hospitals and doctor offices, libraries, religious centers.
- Offer parents training when enrolling children in Pre-K or Kindergarten to share information on resources and activities in the area.
- Educate high school students about child development, parent-child attachment, and the impact of drugs, alcohol, technology, neglect, toxic stress on early childhood.

- Connect parents and teachers together for face to face opportunities to share information about area resources.
- Schools share information with parents of young children 0-5 years old and send them informational packets about school resources, standards, school events, human services and resources.

**Strengthen connections and transitions between home, childcare, preschool, and school:** *Collaboration between childcare providers and school district; transportation needs between half-day preschool and childcare for working parents; expectations of early childhood education and readiness for Kindergarten.*

Childcare providers emphasized interest in communication and collaboration with school district, including access to special services and mental health support. Working parents face transportation challenges for children between ½ day pre-school programs and childcare. Childcare providers emphasize need for developmentally appropriate learning and noted that parents feel stressed about Kindergarten readiness.

**Take action to strengthen connections and transitions from home to child care to pre-school and school:**

- Create opportunities for people who work with young children to interact, collaborate, and visit other program sites and share school expectations.
- Increase postpartum and early home visits to actively support and connect parents to resources. Make home visits available through school age and school district.
- Increase transportation options for all children between schools and childcare.
- Provide access to parenting curriculum and use the same county wide curriculum for screening and parent education. Hold parent groups with regular speakers or topics to discuss.

**Assure accessible and affordable high quality childcare:** *Childcare and activity opportunities vary by community; childcare expenses are a considerable amount of take home pay for working parents; the need for intermittent, increased part-time childcare causes distress for childcare centers.*

Many reported the varying access to childcare options and resources in different communities. Some parents reported childcare expenses can be a challenge for working families, even with steady jobs. Business leaders note the connection between available jobs in the area, income, and whether parents travel with children to childcare closer to employment outside the region.

**Take action to assure affordable and accessible high quality child care:**

- Partner childcare centers with large employment areas or within businesses so childcare is close to work.
- Connect existing network of childcare centers with other centers including family, non-licensed, other, and expand substitute network.
- Schools provide enrichment-based after school programs that stay open until 5-6 PM to match parent work schedules.
- Address the economics of childcare for families and providers. We invest in economic development in Coos County, let's invest in children.

**Support for Families**

**Economy, Jobs, and Family:** *Limited economic opportunity is at the root of many challenges for families and support services.*

From the business community to home visitors, many people noted the impact of the economy on families and children. Social services, such as home visiting, face challenges filling positions with qualified people because of the pay scale and the associated stress of the job. Childcare directors feel the impact as families lose jobs and income,

they need more intermittent childcare which negatively impacts the centers. Economic stress can lead to toxic stress in families affecting children.

**Take action as employers, businesses, and community leaders:**

- Provide free, high quality, age-appropriate, academic/enrichment based school programs to assist parents who cannot leave work at 3pm.
- Connect and communicate with businesses to make sure they understand the connection between supporting early childhood policies, education, and return on investment, including sponsorship of childcare enrollment or family activities.
- Partner childcare centers with employment centers so childcare is close to work.
- Support flexibility in schedules to attend to children’s needs, including paid time off.

**Role of extended family caring for young children:** *Extended family, especially the role of grandparents, play an important role in supporting families with young children by providing childcare, transportation, and activities.*

Participants made note that families of young children include extended family members, often grandparents. Grandparents are involved at a variety of levels and reasons with both stable families and families with parental challenges. Grandparent support allows parents to work by providing childcare and helps with the coordination of transportation or other activities. Social services and childcare providers notice an increase in grandparent involvement in some families where grandparents are the primary guardians or where parents are not consistently involved.

**Take action to support extended family members caring for young children, especially grandparents:**

- Support grandparent involvement with children at the school and community level with grandparent support group, education for grandparents, grandparent volunteers, and lunch with extended family members at school.
- Make it easier for extended family to help in school and health care. Trim the bureaucracy around consent and permission to allow grandparents to make decisions around child’s needs.

**Support all families, address toxic stress:** *Impact of economic stress, mental health concerns, and substance misuse and drugs was a concern; educate teachers and providers to recognize toxic stress and connect children and families to resources; provide education and resources to parents about the impact of toxic stress.*

The concept of toxic stress resonated with many of the community conversation participants. While economic stress and poverty were mentioned as contributors to creating stressful environments, substance misuse was frequently the focus of toxic stress discussions. While some stakeholders did not note a growing concern, many commented on an increase of substance misuse and drugs in the community and the concern about its effect on young children. Mental health issues of parents and within families contributes to the cycle of health concerns, child behavioral issues, and increased needs.

**Take action to relieve toxic stress faced by families:**

- Utilize screening instruments countywide in a variety of settings leading to earlier interventions with substance abuse in homes.
- Help all children have healthy food, snacks, fruits and veggies.
- Educate community, parents, and prospective parents on child development, responsible parents, and psychology, multiple intelligences, limiting screen time, getting outdoors.

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Thank You!