**INTRODUCTION**

The Walla Walla Early Learning Coalition was formed in 2006 in order to “improve conditions for our youngest learners and their families” and with a mission to “support parents as their children’s first teachers, improve access to high quality childcare/preschool and develop a community mobilization that will result in quality early learning opportunities for all young children” (Walla Walla Valley Early Learning Coalition By-Laws, September 2008). Part of the formation and implementation of the Coalition was a needs assessment to find out what resources families with young children are utilizing in the Walla Walla Valley, and which ones are in need of improvement. This report serves as that needs assessment.

**THE WASHINGTON STATE KIDS MATTER FRAMEWORK**

“Kids Matter: Improving Outcomes for Children in Washington State” is the framework that serves both as one of the foundations for the work of the Early Learning Coalition, and as the underlying framework that has guided this needs assessment. With the ultimate goal of having young children healthy and ready for school, the Kids Matter framework posits that there are four critical areas where access to resources are necessary for families in order to achieve that goal: access to health insurance and medical homes; social, emotional, and mental health; early care and education/child care; and parenting information and support (Kids Matter Executive Summary, October 2005).

In order to assist with the mission of the Walla Walla Valley Early Learning Coalition and to follow the Kids Matter framework, the surveys included in this needs assessment focused primarily on kindergarten readiness and the four strategic areas mention above. In addition, parents were asked about their own definitions of kindergarten readiness, and parents and stakeholders were asked questions about their demographic characteristics and their attitudes about resources available in the overall community.

**METHODOLOGY**

After researching the Kids Matter Framework, examining comparative needs assessments in other geographic regions, and conducting an initial focus group interview of the members of the Early Learning Coalition, three surveys were crafted: a short survey designed for parents whose children were entering kindergarten in order to assess parents’ definitions of kindergarten readiness and perceptions of access to community resources (N=182), and two longer surveys
assessing needs and assets for families with young children in the Walla Walla Valley – one administered to parents of young children (N=157), and one administered to community stakeholders, including kindergarten teachers (N=59).

The items on the short parent survey measure parental assessment of their children’s readiness for kindergarten, and the resources in the community that they have used to prepare their children for kindergarten (e.g., a child care center or preschool, or reading to children), both in terms of frequency and whether they feel that have had enough of these resources. The items on the longer surveys measure parents’ or stakeholders’ demographic characteristics, their assessment of resources in our community overall, and their assessment of resources and needs in the four strategic areas of the Kids Matter framework: access to health insurance and medical homes; social, emotional, and mental health; early care and education/child care; and parenting information and support. Many of the questions on these two longer surveys are drawn from the Community Profile Survey of the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative, owned by the Minnesota Initiative Foundations. Permission to use these questions was granted by the Southwest Minnesota Initiative Foundation. For all three surveys, frequencies and means (when appropriate) for each numerical question were tabulated using SPSS and Excel (out of the total number of respondents who answered each question), and open-ended responses to questions were examined for emergent themes and patterns. Some questions were not applicable to all respondents, so calculations are based only on respondents who answered the question under examination (e.g., questions about using paid child care ten or more hours per week).

**KEY FINDINGS**

**PHYSICAL HEALTH AND MEDICINE:** Parents in the Walla Walla Valley are very satisfied with access to medical care for their children, and would like to see more resources devoted to the care of children with special medical needs.

**SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MENTAL HEALTH:** Parents in the Walla Walla Valley recognize high levels of community support and concern for the social, emotional, and mental health needs of young children, but desire improvement in actual access to social/emotional/mental health care resources (including services to care for children with special needs).

**EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION/CHILD CARE:** Parents in the Walla Walla Valley are very satisfied with child care and preschool programs, but find that these resources are few in number and are difficult to access.

**PARENTING INFORMATION AND SUPPORT:** Parents in the Walla Walla Valley generally receive enough information and support to raise their children. However, they feel very strongly that help outside the family is not very available or in an easy-to-access and centrally identifiable location.
THE OVERALL COMMUNITY: Parents generally find the overall community to be supportive of early childhood needs, but very clearly desire more well-advertised family-friendly activities throughout the seasons.

COMPARING PARENTS AND LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS: Parents and Stakeholders are generally similar in their assessment of our community’s resources for families with young children, but stakeholders are more likely than parents to express that we need more resources. In addition, stakeholders are as likely as parents to identify that our community has a lot of support for families with young children, but that access and visibility of resources are in need of improvement, especially for families with children under five.

KINDERGARTEN READINESS: Parents generally find that their children are ready for kindergarten in our community, and use varying strategies to get them ready.

GROUP DIFFERENCES: Belonging to a faith community, using paid child care, being a non-single parent, and being a non-Latino/a parent positively influence how parents of young children see the resources available to them in our community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results in this needs assessment, several definitive recommendations emerge:

- Create and maintain a central and easy-to-access location for parent resources, especially for families with children who have not yet entered school.

- Offer more family activities in the community, especially for kids under 5, during all seasons.

- Create more access to resources for kids with special needs, especially for social, emotional, and mental health needs.

- Ensure that parents continue to have access to resources that prepare their children for kindergarten.

- Connect with other local agencies and groups who are working to improve community resources to ensure that the needs of families with young children are highlighted in larger conversations about regional economic development, housing, and environmental sustainability.

- Devote economic and personnel resources to the following lines of future research: kindergarten teachers’ assessments of children’s readiness upon entering and leaving kindergarten; further market and public opinion analysis of seasonal (fee and no-fee accessed) recreational facilities in the community; follow-up research on the needs of families with young children using similar measures as this study did in order to establish benchmarks and note trends over time.