

2023 Needs Assessment

Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office

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Background

Head Start in Kansas

Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) programs in Kansas, including Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (EHS-CCPs), provide comprehensive early education and family engagement services to young children and their families. Using a whole-child approach, HS/EHS programs focus on building relationships, improving opportunities for families of enrolled children, and increasing school readiness. According to the 2023 Program Information Report (PIR), a federal report completed annually by all HS/EHS grantees, 26 HS/EHS/EHS-CCP grantees provide services to children and families in Kansas, including two (2) American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Native American grantees, as well as one grantee based in Nebraska but serving two Kansas counties. Of these 26 grantees, 18% are Community Action agencies, 39% are Unified School Districts, and 39% are private or public non-profit organizations. Twenty-five provide Head Start services and 19 provide Early Head Start or EHS-CCP services. During the reporting period, these 26 grantees served 4,835 children in HS programming and 2,419 children in EHS/EHS-CCP programming.

Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office

Established by the 2007 Head Start Act, Head Start Collaboration Offices (HSCO) exist "to facilitate collaboration among Head Start agencies...and entities that carry out activities designed to benefit low-income children from birth to school entry, and their families." The Administration for Children of Families (ACF), under the federal Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), awards Head Start Collaboration grants to support the development of multi-agency and public and private partnerships at the state and national levels. These partnerships:

- Assist in building early childhood systems.
- Provide access to comprehensive services and support for all low-income children.
- Encourage widespread collaboration between Head Start and other appropriate programs, services, and initiatives.
- Augment Head Start's capacity to partner in state initiatives on behalf of children and their families.
- Facilitate the involvement of Head Start in state policies, plans, processes, and decisions affecting target populations and other low-income families.

Role of the Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office

The Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO) builds relationships as part of an integrated early childhood system, reflecting a shared commitment to improving the lives of young children and their families through better collaboration between Head Start/Early Head Start (HS/EHS) grantees, state governments and agencies, Head Start Associations, and local communities. To fulfill that role, the federal government authorizes the Kansas HSCO to perform certain duties, including: (1) providing support for activities in the Kansas HSCO priority areas, and (2) contracting with relevant non-profit organizations.

In Kansas, the HSCO is located within the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), the state's child welfare agency. Built upon the fundamental premise of its mission to promote healthy families, DCF supports the Kansas HSCO's efforts to promote improved linkages between Head Start and other child and family agencies providing health, mental health, family, and special needs services to children

and families in Kansas. With a knowledge of the unique characteristics of the state, the Kansas HSCO coordinates and leads efforts for HS/EHS grantees, state governments and agencies, the Kansas Head Start Association, and local communities to work together through:

- Communication
 - Attending stakeholder groups for information sharing, planning, and partnering.
 - Serving as a conduit of information between regional offices and the state and local early childhood systems.
- Access
 - Facilitating Head Start agencies' access to and utilization of appropriate entities so Head Start children and families can secure needed services and critical partnerships are formalized.
- Systems
 - Supporting policy, planning, partnerships, and implementation of cross-agency state systems for early childhood, including the State Advisory Council, that include and serve the Head Start community.

Priorities of the Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office

To leverage common interests regarding young children and their families, Head Start Collaboration Offices (HSCO) provide a structure and a process for the federal Office of Head Start (OHS), under the Department for Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families (DHHS/ACF), to work and partner with state agencies and local entities. In 2023 OHS updated its national priorities to guide the work of each state's Head Start Collaboration Office:

- Collaborate with state systems to align early care and education services and supports for children and families prenatally to age 5.
- Work with state efforts to collect and use data on early childhood programs to guide decision-making and improve child and family outcomes.
- Support the expansion of and access to high-quality workforce and career development opportunities for staff.
- Coordinate with school systems to ensure continuity and alignment across programs, as appropriate.

Additional HSCO priority areas on a regional level may include services to children experiencing homelessness, services to children with disabilities, health services, child welfare, parent and family engagement, community services, and services to military families.

2023 Needs Assessment

Purpose

The Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO), funded through a grant from the Department for Health and Human Services/Administration of Children and Families (DHHS/ACF), conducts a required needs assessment annually to identify gaps in collaboration amongst Kansas Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) grantees, their partners, and other service providers. The Kansas HSCO conducted the 2023 Needs Assessment through a contract with the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (KU-CPPR).

Methodology

For the 2023 Needs Assessment, the Kansas HSCO utilized two methods for gathering information from Kansas Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) grantees: virtual focus group sessions and an electronic survey. All Kansas HS/EHS grantees had the opportunity to participate in the needs assessment through one or both methods. Prior to 2019, the Kansas HSCO collected data for the annual needs assessment primarily through online surveys with various open-ended questions. In 2019, the Kansas HSCO invited program directors to participate in a series of virtual focus groups. Due to the success of both methods of data collection, and the desire to gather information from as many Kansas HS/EHS grantees as possible by easing barriers to participation, the Kansas HSCO has utilized both the online survey and virtual focus groups every year since.

The online survey and two focus group sessions for this 2023 Needs Assessment occurred in September 2023. The discussion questions for each focus group were the same. Fourteen (14) individuals participated in one or both activities. The participation rate was 54% of all Kansas HS and EHS grantees. In addition to the focus groups and online surveys, this year participants were also given the opportunity to engage via poll questions and respond to brief prompts via QR code at the Kansas Head Start Association's Affiliate Program Member Meeting (KHSA APM). The Kansas HSCO Needs Assessment team analyzed the online survey results and the focus group discussion transcripts along with the newly implemented poll questions to identify and compile key themes and trends for this 2023 Needs Assessment report.

2023 Findings

The Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO) invited all Kansas Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) grantees to participate in the annual needs assessment process. Fourteen (14) Kansas HS/EHS grantees participated in the 2023 Needs Assessment: Six (6) in a virtual focus group discussion and eight (8) in the online survey. Fifty-four percent of the 26 Kansas grantees participated in 2023. Focus group discussion questions and survey questions provided grantees an opportunity to share successful strategies for engaging and supporting families, partnering with community organizations and agencies to connect children and families with resources, creating smooth transitions between HS/EHS and other programs, and recruiting and retaining staff. Grantees also had the opportunity to share current challenges and struggles along with areas for potential or additional support from the Kansas HSCO.

The 2023 Needs Assessment emphasized the creative and innovative approaches that grantees use to engage both the families and communities served. By and large, grantees were able to share successes over the past year in spite of the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many pointed to the ingenuity of and connections formed with their communities to provide bright spots around their services. The 2023 Needs Assessment highlights some of these themes when discussing the prevalent findings collected from Kansas HS/EHS grantees. These findings include:

- Kansas HS/EHS grantees remain nimble and innovative when it comes to serving the children and families in their communities even in the changing circumstances of the pandemic. Grantees have been able to leverage previous successful strategies and adopt new tactics to tackle issues such as staff recruitment, family needs, and program transitions.
- Grantees work closely with and continue to form new relationships with community partners to help meet the needs of the children and families in their communities. Grantees shared examples of how relationships have been built within the community to ensure families are referred to and connected with needed resources.
- Transitions from HS to Kindergarten, as well as, from EHS to HS are a focus for many grantees to help ensure the success of the children they serve as they move to their next level of education. These transitions have been particularly successful for grantees co-located with their school districts. Grantees mentioned the importance of transitions as they have seen an increase in behavioral issues with some students that they associate with limited interactions due to the pandemic.

The challenges experienced by Kansas HS/EHS grantees are similar to those experienced by other professionals in the early childhood care and education system in the state of Kansas. Many of these issues existed prior to the pandemic but were certainly exacerbated as the pandemic wore on and matched those identified within the *All In For Kansas Kids* 2021 Needs Assessment Update. Other challenges were new or transformed during the pandemic as Kansas HS/EHS grantees were forced to adapt as the conditions of the pandemic evolved. Based on these 2023 Needs Assessment findings, the Kansas HSCO identifies the following opportunities for supporting the success of Kansas HS/EHS grantees and collaborating with others in the early childhood and education system:

- Strengthen relationships and coordination across early childhood care and education sectors, particularly for behavioral and mental health support for both children and staff. Behavioral health supports seemed to be of particular importance for children who may have limited time outside of the home during the pandemic.
- Workforce recruitment and retention continues to be a concern for Kansas HS/EHS grantees as well as the larger early childhood care and education field. While individual grantees have tried adaptive approaches to recruitment and retention with some success, collaborating with other state-level workforce initiatives like the implementation of career pathways and participation in the Early Childhood Workforce Advisory Group are needed to most effectively meet the workforce needs.
- Grantees also mentioned that finding culturally relevant programming for the diverse families they serve would contribute to the success of children and families. Resources to support connections to community and state-level services and initiatives aimed at diversity and inclusion for newly immigrated and refugee families are needed to best support grantees providing services to these diverse populations.

Topic Areas

For the 2023 Needs Assessment, the Kansas HSCO invited Kansas HS/ESH grantees to share their experience on four separate topic areas school district collaboration, family engagement, family/community partnerships, and workforce recruitment/retention, as well as, provide additional information about program challenges and success from the past year. While Kansas HS and ESH grantees vary by agency and organizational structure, program size and model, and community demographics, participants shared similar successes, strategies, and challenges over the past year. Many of these echoed programming, partnership, and workforce challenges shared during past Kansas HSCO Needs Assessments.

Responses from the focus groups and survey respondents to topic area prompts are summarized below along with any accompanying poll questions. The responses have been edited slightly for clarity.

School District Collaboration, Kindergarten Transitions, and Serving Children with Disabilities:

- **The 2022 Needs Assessment noted many strategies for successful transitions from EHS to HS to Kindergarten centered around frequent and purposeful communication and data-sharing. Examples include teacher visits and meetings, parent informational meetings, formal transition protocols, and customized transition reports. Since this time is there anything new that you would like to share about your program's transition practices?**
- **What strategies do you find helpful in engaging school district partnerships for coordinating transition practices?**
- **How do you coordinate with school districts and families to meet the needs of children receiving special education services?**

Participants in the 2023 Needs Assessment discussed similar strategies around student transitions and school district collaborations. Among the strategies, grantees emphasized the effort and intention place of making transitions easier for children, families, and the staff involved in the transitions. Grantees in particular mentioned the care taken to assure staff were aware of children's needs and capabilities as they transitioned from one classroom to the next. Strategies included face-to-face meetings for all parties involved to become familiarized with each other and the surroundings and the sharing of data from program to program and program to family to best understand a child's developmental path. This included additional coaching and knowledge transfer from staff and families to best advocate for a child's development.

A poll of participating grantees indicated that service areas ranged in size from covering a single school district to one that covered ten plus school districts with most covering from two to five districts. While the coverage areas did range from small to large, most participants indicated strong relationships with their school districts. This was especially true where school districts were the recipients or were co-located within district buildings or had coordinator positions to facilitate strong relationships. All grantees indicated strategies in place to continue district collaboration as well as ones continuing to be developed but would continue to benefit from support in partnering with local school districts.

A sampling of participant responses:

“We have kind of changed things just a little bit as far as from our early Head Start to Head Start. We try to do a meeting between the two family advocates from each program and the teacher just so they know what situation the family is in, what all our early Head Start advocate has helped them with, and issues that might arise for a classroom teacher. As far as kids going from Head Start to kindergarten, we've kind of reworked the kind of data and how much data we send to the kindergarten teachers, specifically what they were requesting from us. So we kind of streamlined that a little bit and we have kindergarten teachers come to our parent meetings in the spring just to talk about, you know, the expectations for kindergarten.”

“...something new that we put into place at the end of last year is a formal protocol across our district. We have a "transition to kindergarten" Google form that all preschool teachers fill out. The kindergarten teachers receive it in the fall. In addition to that, we felt they needed information about some more high-flying students sooner rather than later. So, I put together a document specifically for tier 2 and tier 3 behavioral students. It provides a brief background and a paragraph about the child. Our recommendations might include meeting with us as a school team, meeting with the parents, or inviting them in for a tour ahead of time. This is all to ensure a smoother transition into kindergarten.”

“We do the transition packets and information for all of the children that we pass along. But then we also have the meeting with staff. Special education has their transition meetings, but we have a meeting for other children that we might have concerns about where we'll meet with the principal and kindergarten teacher or counselor... for some of the students we have them come and do an observation before they leave us.”

“One of the things that that we've realized, we're always showing sharing data with each other or with our families and it came to light that that our families were not understanding the data when we show them the progress. So we are going to start being more intentional with really teaching and educating families what to look for because a lot of them just don't have that experience of looking at data. So we're going to be more intentional with when we appear in conferences, and we're sharing assessment data because we want them to continue to be advocates for their children after they leave us and go on into elementary school. So that's something that I think we're kind of excited about just giving our families more tools to use, to advocate and just understand their children.”

“Our community has a kindergarten Transition Task Force with representation from many community stakeholders. The focus is to strengthen relationships to increase student success as they leave pre-K programs and enter kindergarten.”

“The best things that we have found here in Dodge City do not necessarily have to do with transition up to preschool, but we have engaged our first stop enrollment agency and they're passing on names to us of families that would have children in the ages of Head Start and Early Head Start. Then they give us that data so we can reach out to them and invite them to be part of our programs as well. That allows us to help them learn to advocate for their children but also learn what it means to be part of a school, what it means to call your kid in sick... We're really working well with them and it has increased our numbers for enrollment sort of that reverse referral or the circular referral practice.”

“ We try to regularly invite school district personnel to visit our classrooms. It's easy for us to say how great early childhood education is, and how important it is, but it really makes a difference when they actually come and see things happening in the classroom and see the children, so that's been more intentional the last few years. That I think, has made a difference, and the district hired a liaison for early

childhood community partnership to kind of work more with families, and actually the person they hired was a former Heartland employee so, she knew a lot about Head Start.”

“We use opportunities on district-wide professional development days to do vertical collaboration between our preschool teachers and our kindergarten teachers. That generally happens in April, right before we get ready to put together those transition documents. So they talk about what's important for them to see in kindergarten. How are we doing that at preschool? Just kind of touching base on those types of things. Then we also have an Early Childhood Coordinator helping keep consistent communication across our district.”

“We are under the umbrella of our local school district and have support at the district level in this area.”

“We are in the school buildings and work to collaborate on a daily basis.”

“We have to, we have Part C and Part B in our building. Part C is more of a home visit model, but they do come to our daycare and visit our children here, but they do come every so often just to get a teacher's view and see how they're participating with other peers... Our preschool, we have three preschool special education classes in our building, and we also have support at the school site for speech for private appointments as well for children that don't meet the model of the classroom. So I feel our special education collaboration with both entities is very supportive and very positive for our families.”

“The school district is our grantee and I oversee multiple programs, so we're pretty fortunate in that. Within our site, we have special education staff right on site that come and see the children right there. We have a full-time speech pathologist who is on staff through the special education co-op that is housed at our location to serve our children. For our outlying classrooms that are in other school districts, we have an agreement with them, and they're in their school buildings, so they're providing the special education support right there as they need it.”

“We also have an early childhood special education coordinator at the district level, who, specifically aids families of early childhood students who will be in special education programs like our preschool intervention programs and then coordinates with our special education. Teams here in my building serve as coordinators for them to ensure deadlines or met, that IP processes are followed, and all those special education nuances are in place.”

“This really depends on the district/SPED co-op. Some they will not serve at our center, the children are then pulled from HS and sent to 1/2 day at the school. Others provide services in our center and we are able to collaborate to both serve the child.”

“We coordinate communication and transition efforts/timelines for events to support families. We share internal and external info to avoid duplication as appropriate with consents as applicable.”

Family Engagement:

- **Please share a few strategies you have found successful in the past year for connecting families with community resources.**
- **Please provide ONE example of a successful activity or event you held in the past six months to promote family engagement or to link families to resources needed. What was the**

outcome or participation in this activity? (EXAMPLE: drive-thru pizza nights, outdoor picnics or similar events, family fun nights).

- **Last summer the HSCO received a donation of home safety items from Safe Kids KS. These items were distributed to the state-funded EHS Home Visitation grantees to give to the families they work with. How was your program able to utilize these items and were there any particular items you wish you had more quantities available?**

As part of the family engagement topic area, grantees were polled to indicate the top five areas of need for the families they serve. The top two areas were affordable housing and access to mental health resources which were selected by 100% of the poll respondents. Additional highly ranked needs included transportation and fuel 70%, access to food 60%, and access to drug and alcohol prevention services 60%. These same needs also appeared as grantees discussed partnerships and challenges under other topic areas.

Focus group participants shared a variety of successful strategies for connecting families to resources. Strategies ranged from increased focus on the Family Partnership Agreement process (a goal-setting process for all HS/EHS families) to bringing service providers in-house at regular intervals to provide services and information in a convenient venue. Others indicated an increased effort to help navigate families with less knowledge of available resources through the process including warm handoffs in person to engender familiarity to increase referral follow-through.

Grantees shared many innovative and engaging activities they held within their communities to help link families to resources. Often these activities were able to engage other local partners to increase reach and success. Some examples include local library events to draw attention to a new children's area, a community-wide event where kids can experience heavy machinery while families view resources, farmers markets for food and other resources, and father/child events. All of these activities included fun for children and families while also incorporating education sessions and resource connections. An additional question was asked in this section about an opportunity in the past year for state-funded EHS grantees to receive home safety supplies which were made available as a donation from Safe Kids Kansas. To provide feedback to the funder and information for future funding opportunities, grantees were asked about the usefulness of the home safety items. All grantees indicated that they and the families they serve were grateful for the items and would be interested in more in the future should they become available. Items of particular interest and utility mentioned included electrical covers, child safety gates, and smoke/carbon monoxide detectors.

A sampling of participant responses:

"Our community has developed a handout of all the different agencies, be it from domestic violence to doctors to dentists to community agencies that will help families. We have resources for families that have a member incarcerated and that has been a great starting place for us to get families to the correct type of resource, but also walking them through that, not just saying here's a handout, you can look through that and find out, you know where you need to be. Helping them make that first connection and going with them to introduce ourselves and let them know what services this family might need, and we have advocates from both the zero to three and the three to five model who can do that for our families and that has been very well received as well by families."

"I wouldn't say we've done anything different than what we've done in the past, really just using our family partnerships, agreements, and goals that our family advocates are setting with families to determine what resources they might need. And then we've got our community resource checklists that we utilize and just different programs that our family advocates are aware of for making those referrals."

"We do rotate in (to the office) all the different resources in the community just to train with our family advocates. Make sure they're up to date on everything that they are now providing so that they can share that with the families."

"We started last year taking our staff or our family consultants on staff field trips to different agencies to talk to them and to really go on site to see the services they offer. Then they can just be better advocates for the families. Now we have one of our family consultant specialists focusing on community partnerships, so she's always searching for other agencies to visit and really get that hands-on experience."

"We have found it important to bring the family and support them through the resource process. Some families will go on their own, others need a bit more assistance."

"We are reconnecting with the community resource agencies because they, like us, are experiencing high staff turnover. Many staff we developed relationships with are gone."

"We had a social connection where Early Head Start and went to our Public Library which has a new children's area that I don't think a lot of families know is there. We took families there and they did a story time with us and showed families around the library and what all they offer. It was very well received and the fact that literacy is so important for young children whose minds are just growing and learning new words. The more words that we can get them introduced to, eventually hopefully, will help their third grade reading scores."

"We just had our Go Truck Go event last week. We opened that up to the community, and we had about 638 people, I think, so that is always a big draw. I think it's just because we've done it for years. The community knows it, and now all the businesses have gotten into it. Now people are adding slides to their machinery and kind of outdoing each other, and people call us to ask us if they can bring things, and people are donating for the meal, so I feel like it's just generated a lot of momentum."

"We still have our what we call Daddy & Me days, even though they're also open to moms. It was established by dads on one Saturday, a month events with kids. We had it at the golf course, and I'm trying to think off the top of my head, I would say we probably had about 65 individuals there, just from our program."

"One thing that we've done out in Northwest Kansas that's been a hit, this will be our third year, is we've done "Men and Minis." We have a gal who works for us who's just amazing. She plans an hour-long activity. It usually involves some kind of food that they cook together with their kids. They do an art activity, and then they might do either a math lesson or something. But they're in the classrooms, and it's during school time. It's a significant male role model who comes in the fall with the kids. So, it's "Men and Minis," and then in the spring, we do "Ladies and Littles." Honestly, of all our kids, it's rare that we're having to find a man or a lady. They usually have somebody show up, and they just love it. Kay Mitchell"

runs around and does it in every classroom. She does it really well. So, she's one of those people that others just want to be around, and that works out really nicely."

"Okay. Technically, it hasn't happened yet. It's next week. But we do it every year. So the point of we have. We called our outdoor Health Night. So this year focuses on not just general health but mental health. We have community partners who come and set up tables around our playground with resources and information. We'll have different places that we often refer our families to right there on-site. So they get a little passport, and families go around, visit a certain number of stations. Once they've gotten some information, and then we feed them dinner, and they all get to play on the playground. So it is one of our most well-attended events."

"Outdoor farmers market family night with SNAP eligible items, library books giveaway, and nutrition activities."

"The Back to School nights are always well attended. Families get to see the center/classroom and visit with staff. Children are engaged through a fun activity."

Family & Community Partnerships:

- **Please share a few examples of successful work with community partners in the past year to help meet the needs of families.**
- **Who are the main service providers that families access for resources in your community? What types of resources do they provide?**

Building off of responses in the previous family engagement topic area, grantees continued to emphasize the importance of community partnerships when it came to meeting the needs of the children and families they serve. Participants indicated strong relationships with community organizations in both the public and private sectors, and at least one discussed the local task force initiatives aimed at strengthening child care availability within the community. Several also discussed bringing community partners in-house to meet families on-site and collaborations to streamline referrals from provider to provider.

Echoing the earlier poll question participants indicated mental and behavioral health partnerships are critical, as well as a continued and growing need for basic assistance help for things like food, clothing, and transportation. Another important resource provided by community partners centered around culturally appropriate translation and immigrant/refugee resources.

A sampling of participant responses:

"For us it's our Part C relationship that we have. They make referrals to us, we make referrals to them and that has been a very healthy relationship between the two of us and for our programs. Another one that we do is with our Salvation Army getting families needed household things and needed clothing. WIC donates to families, so we've been able to refer families to WIC and also receive referrals for families that might benefit from our services, plus, you know, families that might need formula that was kind of big."

“We have had a task force that's been in place now for probably 2 years now around child care and the need for child care in our community. It has been working on a lot of great things getting businesses involved and community leaders involved. So we're making some real headway with having child care options available in Hays. In fact, this is the first year I have had no staff who have had concerns about being able to get child care to come back to work.”

“One of our biggest community partners is Advisors Excel, and they are a large employer in the county. They do several things with us. We have our annual coat and shoe drive. They set up our gym like a little store, and every kid gets in to shop for coats, shoes, hats, and gloves. That just takes something off families' plates at the start of holiday time and something they don't have to worry about.”

“We invited WIC to attend our summer screening events. They were able to enroll or recertify several families at each of our locations.”

“The Riley County Health Department provides many services for families of young children including the Maternal and Child Health program, WIC, Raising Riley Child Care program, KanCare application support, and prenatal services. DCF (Department for Children and Families) also provides support to many of our enrolled families through TANF, SNAP, and child care subsidies.”

“El Centro is a great resource for families needing comprehensive services in Spanish. Many are also accessing health services from the Pharmacy of Grace and the Medicine Cabinet. We refer uninsured or underinsured families to the KU Jaydoc clinic. It also helps staff without coverage.”

“Catholic Charities, they help a lot of refugee families that are coming into our area and they will refer to us as well so that works out. It helps the families get someone in their home and help them become acclimated to our city and also help recognize their culture and what our culture is.”

Staff Retention & Recruitment:

- **In the last focus group discussion programs shared they found most success in recruiting staff had been using social media, community events, offering hiring incentives, offering flexibility in FTE for positions, posting realistic job titles, communicating clear job expectations, and recruiting from HS/EHS parents. Do you find this is still the case? Have you found any additional strategies?**

The staff retention and recruitment topic area included two separate polls to assess staffing issues and staff needs. The first focused on current staffing and the grantees' ability to build and maintain desired capacity. Most of the respondents indicated that their classrooms were not fully staffed and currently had vacant positions, however, most also indicated that they had not needed to close classrooms due to staffing issues. All respondents indicated that they had been able to hire new staff in the last 90 days, potentially pointing to the success of some of the strategies shared in the focus group and survey questions.

Strategies shared for recruitment showed grantees remain creative in their approach to hiring and receptive to new mediums for attracting skilled staff members. Methods included word of mouth and taking advantage of social networks both virtual and physical, this included staff members recruiting friends and relatives, connections through the families served, and one grantee with connections at the local universities sending out job opportunities to related majors. Recruitment bonuses were another tactic mentioned by several grantees to help incentivize the connection of social network recruitment.

Another grantee mentioned being flexible to attract individuals who might not be available full-time, including students.

A follow-up poll question asked grantees about the top five training needs they see for current staff. The top response was for training on strategies to support dealing with children's challenging behaviors 91% of respondents, mirroring issues raised in other topic areas. Other highly ranked responses include mental health 73%, staff wellness 73%, and Continuum of Guided Play/Play Based Learning 45%.

A sampling of participant responses:

"Another thing that we do is we recruit from our current staff, you know, do they have any family members? Do they have friends? Do they know anybody that might be interested in working, you know, in a school, in a daycare, doing home visits? That's been helpful as well."

"We've had 2 job fairs just for our agency, so in August we had a job fair and six people came. We had one yesterday and did a lot of advertising on radio and social media and we had 11 people come in. Of course, where it used to be one at full time, now we have people saying I could work Tuesdays, Thursdays. We'll take it all. We had a football player from Kansas, Wesleyan come in. I think he'll be a great addition but he has classes Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, so he can be with us Tuesday and Thursday, and so you just got to make it work. And you got to be flexible."

"We're in a different spot where we have Fort Hays State (University) here. So, I reached out to a speech pathology staff member, the early childhood staff member, and the teacher's Ed department, and they sent all our information job description out to all their students."

"I'm working long game over here. We've got a pathway in our school district at our Topeka Center for Advanced Learning and Careers and it is an education pathway. That group now volunteers in my building... once a week. We're just going to grow our own educators starting with them as freshman in high school and in a few years I'm going to solve the crisis."

"We do have a local foundation who we've partnered with, and they are helping us move our classified staff to certified. They're providing scholarships for them to go back to school. So that's been a kind of a game changer. If we find paras that we think are just great with kids and incredible work ethic. Then we chat with them about the scholarship opportunity. Sometimes now it's the words getting out and they're coming to chat with us about wanting to go to school. That's the only reason that we're fully staffed right now."

"We are trying/have tried all of these things and still sit where we were back then. Wages have to be looked at and figure out a way to support staff and fully support all children with rising special needs."

"We have a referral incentive as part of the school district. I can't recall exactly how much, but if somebody knows somebody and they refer them and we interview and we hire them, then I think they get, I want to say, \$350. We have been trying to promote that."

"Our district is doing something similar to the incentives. It's only for certified licensed staff members. But it's a \$500 referral bonus if you refer and we recruit and get a certified staff member."

Other Program Information:

- **What other challenges, other than those already shared, exist and what would help your program make progress around this challenge?**
- **What accomplishments are you most proud of in the past year?**
- **What would you like your community to know about your program?**

Grantees mentioned a variety of different challenges when it came to their ability to best serve children and families while offering high-quality care. These challenges included some of those mentioned in previous needs assessments and other topic areas including workforce issues, mental health needs for staff and families, behavioral challenges from children, basic needs, and culturally responsive resources for families.

Respondents were also quick to point out the many accomplishments they had seen over the course of the past year. Many grantees were eager to point out how pleased they were with the hard work put in by their staff members to serve families in often difficult circumstances and help them get the resources they need to be successful. Others mentioned accomplishments and awards received over the past year or new and expanded services they are now able to offer their community. Finally, Grantees really wanted their communities to know that they are there for them and provide so much more than just child care.

A sampling of participant responses (Challenges):

“Well, a barrier that I have is just needing more space. The district has been very generous in, you know, letting us use this building and we have seven classrooms in it, but really, we could fill so many more classrooms if we had the space and I think three to five is growing exponentially.”

“Staff Wellness is such a huge piece right now. People are dealing with children who have been home through the pandemic and coming to school and parents are doing the right thing, getting them into preschool, getting them into childcare, just to get our socialization built back up. That's been a little difficult for us this year as well as the fact that our numbers are growing every day and we're getting more kids in as parents are ready to get out back into the communities and back into the workforce.”

“When I thought about access to mental health resources. I thought specifically about access for children at the age level that we serve, and I would say that need has increased significantly over the past couple of years.”

“A lot more children that have not been away from home, or those coming in with some significant developmental needs. You know I used to be concerned just about the ones that are not toilet trained, but I have ones coming in that haven't even got them off the bottle yet. And so just greater needs.”

“Greater needs are arising, especially in the area of access to food. In our community, we're starting to feed kids because one out of nine families are food insecure with the rising prices. People are having to choose between food, medicine, rent, and utilities. Transportation is also becoming a challenge as filling gas tanks becomes more expensive. These issues have always existed, but they're becoming more significant for more families now.”

“Transportation - obtaining a CDL is so difficult in Kansas now. We do not have bus drivers. Our drivers are our teaching staff. Therefore, we have had to eliminate transportation to and from HS in several of our sites. Deciding what to do and how to plan for the future in transportation has been challenging.”

“Some of the assessments we use are not a culturally relevant assessment for the demographic that we serve. I think they are outdated and need to be updated. And I would like for us to find perhaps different assessment measures to use, and that is a challenge because I truly believe it's impacting the scores that students are getting the way that this assessment is designed.”

A sampling of participant responses (Accomplishments):

“I am just so proud of how our staff has reacted to all the challenges in the classrooms and in home visiting and how they've been able to help families succeed. Families and children in this area are often young and deal with adult problems without the ability to know how to deal with them and our staff is on the frontline of that. By them being able to reach out to families and reach out to different community resources to help these families is just amazing what they are able to do, and I'm just really proud of all of our programs for being able to do that.”

“Our staff wellness activities are exciting. We truly believe that our staff are our biggest asset. Taking care of staff and promoting their well-being makes the program better!”

“We have so many highlights. Several HS Award winners, KHSA board members on staff, new partnerships, Focus Area 2 was passed with flying colors, staff presented at the Regional Conference and now are scheduled for the National Conference, Conscious Discipline contract and bringing the training to our program, sending field staff to conferences, and much, much more.”

“We're starting our sixth year of providing weekend food support for our identified children, and we get all anonymous donations. Local donations don't use any Head Start money to do that but this year we will reach 10,000 bags that we've given out, but because of the age of the children, we can't just automatically give them. We have to get parental consent. It's not all about nutritional needs, it's about calories because we have teachers who are identifying children coming to school on Monday hungry, very hungry, upset when breakfast is over, and sometimes, you know, pulling food out of the trash can just concerned, you know, fearful that they're not going to have food. So that's really been helpful.”

“One thing that we are really happy about is that we were able to get a person hired who was previously working at a treatment center since we see people who are struggling with addiction and substance use. She goes into homes and does personal counselling with families. She just started six weeks ago but she is already full steam ahead with six families. It may not feel like much but just getting families to say yes that is hard with those issues.”

“I would say one of the things that we are happy about just our continued mental health services partnership. They come in and not only provide our mental health consultation, but provide us some registered behavior technician support within the classrooms, and then we are also working with our community mental health, and they're coming in and doing playgroups as well as some individual therapy with some students. So you know, honestly, I don't know what I would do without some of their support.”

“With the Fort Hays State speech-language clinic and the hearing clinic, we have them rolled into our process. Once parents give permission before they go to evaluation, they can work with a student to see what impact that has and if they really need to go on to a special education and can help with evaluation.”

“I think what I would like our community to know about our program is we are not just an income-based program that we have we have programs for all kids. If they would just apply, we can see where they would fall in our programs, be it head start, early head start, childcare, parents as teachers, or home visitation. And another thing that we help is our young parents, parents that are still in school, we help them with child care so they're able to finish their high school degree.”

“I feel like our community knows about us pretty well, but I just don't know that everybody truly knows all the great work that we do... it takes a while to wrap your head around all the good things that we do, and everything we touch, so it would be nice if people really had a full picture of all the support we can give to children and families.”

Alignment with 2021-2026 Strategic Plan

Strategic Plan Goals

In 2020, the Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO) utilized the data collected for that year's Needs Assessment to create its 2021-2026 Strategic plan in alignment with the HSCO priority areas set forth by the Federal Office of Head Start and the Region VII Office of Head Start. A variety of stakeholders provided input into the 2021-2026 Strategic Plan, including the Kansas Head Start Association (KHSA), Kansas Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) program directors, state partners, and other early childhood stakeholders.

The 2021-2026 Strategic Plan includes six long-range goals with short-term objectives and process goals for each. These long-range goals respond to areas of interest and/or concerns identified by Kansas Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) program directors during the 2020 Needs Assessment process.

- Long Range Goal #1: Ensure that Head Start is involved in the development of state policies, plans, processes, and decisions impacting Head Start.
- Long Range Goal #2: Enhance information sharing through data systems among Head Start Programs, partners, and state agencies to maximize resources and support for Head Start and low-income children, families, and child care systems.
- Long Range Goal #3: Head Start is actively involved in the review of the KS L2Q program/initiative to ensure that it meets the quality improvement needs of HS programs in Kansas.
- Long Range Goal #4: Promote the recruitment and retention of a high-quality early childhood workforce.
- Long Range Goal #5: Increase State and local level coordination and capacity of Early Childhood Systems. Maximize resources and expand services and support for Head Start and low-income children and families.
- Long Range Goal #6: Increase Head Start and School District coordination by maximizing resources for Head Start and low-income children and families.

Alignment with the 2023 Needs Assessment

The 2021-2026 Strategic Plan of the Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO) is intended to guide and further efforts and strategies in response to the needs of Kansas Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) programs and in alignment with the priorities of the HSCO as determined and stated by the Office of Head Start. Each long-range goal aligns with a federal and regional priority area and includes short-term objectives and progress goals to support the continued advancement of the long-range goals. As part of the 2023 Needs Assessment process, the Kansas HSCO has reviewed the alignment between the needs assessment findings and the long-range goals of the 2021-2026 strategic plan and found that the identified needs/challenges and potential focus areas align with and reflect the goals and objectives of the strategic plan, especially with long-range goals 4, 5, and 6, which focus on workforce recruitment and retention, family and child needs, and partnerships with school districts.