

Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office

2023 Needs Assessment Summary

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 annual needs assessment to identify gaps in collaboration between Kansas Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) grantees, their partners, and other service providers. For the 2023 Needs Assessment, the Kansas HSCO invited the input and participation of Kansas HS/EHS grantees through an online survey and two focus group sessions in September 2023. Fourteen (14) participants in one or both activities.

The 2023 Needs Assessment once again 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 despite 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 meet the workforce needs most effectively.
- 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.

Based on the 2023 Needs Assessment findings, the Kansas HSCO will continue to grow its partnerships with key contributors across the early childhood system by facilitating and strengthening coordination and partnering across sectors; continuing engagement efforts to strengthen the Kansas early childhood workforce, leveraging state-wide early childhood workforce efforts to meet the unique needs of HS/EHS grantees across communities; and providing coordination support and resources between HS/EHS program directors, child care providers, and Local Education Agencies (LEAs).