

2015-2016 Southington Community Survey

Summary of Southington 1:1 Interviews and Focus Groups

Conducted November 2015 through March 2016

Background

As part of the Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington's (ECCS) Strategic Planning, ECCS contracted Paul Vivian, an outside consultant to conduct a series of 1:1 interviews, and focus groups. These interviews and focus groups were to be held with key informants in the community, as well as focus groups, representing a wide range of outside groups. This report summarizes those 1:1 interviews and focus groups which were held between November 2015 and March 2016.

1:1 Interviews

- Tim Connellan, Superintendent of Schools
- Steve Madancy, Assistant Superintendent of Schools
- Garry Brumback, Town Manager, Town of Southington
- Janet Mellon, Community Services
- Jim Williamson, President, Community Foundation of Greater New Britain
- John Daley, Chief, Southington Police Department
- John Myers, Executive Director, Southington YMCA
- Senator Joe Markley, R-16th Senate District
- Susan Saucier, Director, Southington Youth Services
- Susan Smayda, Executive Director, Southington Public Library

Focus Groups

- Mary Our Queen Church Knitting Ministry (15 participants – all grandmothers)
- PTO Presidents (2 participants)
- Rotary Club of Southington (28 participants)
- Southington Clergy Association (6 participants)
- Southington STEPS (25 participants)

All of the 1:1 interviewees and focus groups were asked the same basic questions but 1:1 interviewees were also asked more specific questions, which really delved deeper into these five basic questions asked at the focus groups. Those responses will also be discussed.

The focus group questions asked were:

- What are some programs and services that exist in Southington that you think are good for children and families?
- What are the biggest challenges for Southington families with young children?

- Are children in Southington well prepared to enter kindergarten?
- Now that Southington has full day kindergarten, do you think this is a benefit to the students?
- What resources are available for parents?

For the purpose of this report, each of these questions and the respective responses will be summarized. In order to maintain confidentiality, comments will be attributed to a focus group participant or 1:1 interviewee. No names will be used. Actual quotes will be used where it is determined to be helpful but the quote will be attributed to a 1:1 interviewee or participant in a focus group, not an individual.

Each question will also be analyzed to see if there was a differentiation of response between interviewees and focus group participants.

What are some programs and services that exist in Southington that you think are good for children and families?

There were a number of responses to this question. The most consistent response that I heard from both 1:1 interviewees and focus group participants was that “Southington is a wonderful place to raise a family.” Many programs and services were identified as “good” for children and families. They include:

- Southington YMCA
- Margaret Griffin Center
- Youth sports leagues (i.e., baseball, softball, soccer, football, lacrosse, basketball)
- The Public School System
- Gymnastics Programs
- Youth Theater (including summer)
- Camp Sloper
- Before and After School Programs
- Southington Library has programs for infants through adults
- Church Youth Groups

On the surface, it appears that Southington has a wide variety of programs and services for children and families, but when I probed a little deeper, many respondents noted that many of the programs and services identified had a cost associated with them and, there was a general acknowledgement that for families struggling with financial issues that many of these programs and services seemed “out of reach.”

One 1:1 interviewee stated, “that although many of these programs had scholarships available to families that many of the families that might qualify for a scholarship might not be aware of these scholarships or they may feel uncomfortable asking for a scholarship.” This is important to note for future planning and program development for children. The issue of cost needs to be addressed in a manner in which it is sensitive to

the needs of all children. Otherwise, we risk not reaching the most vulnerable children or children who might most benefit from these programs and services.

What are the biggest challenges for Southington families with young children?

There were a wide array of responses both in the 1:1 interviews and focus groups. The following were the most common issues raised in response to this question:

- Juggling all of the responsibilities of work and family life
- Finding quality childcare
- Wondering what the best ways are to socialize young children
- Helping young children to balance their life with parents who are divorced or divorcing and needing to go back and forth
- Families who have a constant struggle with finances for all of the things that the family needs
- Too much television and “device” time
- Finding mental health care services for young children
- Concern with obesity and inactivity for children
- Living in a community with lots of resources for children but not being able to afford those services
- Not having access to a car makes it difficult in this community to access programs and services

Again the issue of not having the financial resources to access the many and varied programs for children was raised by a number of 1:1 interviewees and focus group participants. Program planners need to address this concern if we are to reach Southington’s most vulnerable population. It was noted that the YMCA does outreach to target neighborhoods within the community but more needs to be done to “even the playing field” so that all of Southington’s children have access to the educational, social and recreational programs available in this community.

Are children in Southington well prepared to enter kindergarten?

The overwhelming response to this question was, “Yes, children in Southington are well prepared to enter kindergarten.” The quality of preschool programs, library programs and programs at the Family Resource Center were all cited as reasons why children in Southington are well prepared to enter kindergarten. A number of 1:1 interviewees were also concerned, that because children can enter kindergarten at age four, provided they turn five by December 31st of that year, that if those students have not had a preschool

experience, they will be far behind their peers. One interviewee remarked: “We have parents who are able to keep their children home and enroll their children when they are six years of age and those children have had enrichment activities, and a wonderful preschool experience, sitting next to a child who is four years old and did not have a preschool experience. The achievement gap has already begun.”

One potential solution to this issue was raised during the 1:1 interviews. This interviewee stated that it would be important for school officials to identify those four year olds who did not have a preschool experience, and offer some type of program prior to their kindergarten year. Parents are asked whether or not their children have had a preschool experience during kindergarten registration, so they know who these children are months before school starts. An intervention, at this time, might be a wise investment of time and resources.

Many communities in Connecticut sponsor a two-week program for the identified students who have not had a preschool experience. They attend a two week “boot camp,” where the student is familiarized to a school setting, and basic skills like waiting one’s turn, or sitting in a group circle.

Now that Southington has full day kindergarten, do you think this is a benefit to the students?

The responses to this question were very similar to the responses to the above question – there is a clear benefit for children having the opportunity to attend full day kindergarten. However, there was a real concern expressed regarding those children, especially the four year olds, who did not have a preschool experience. Focus group participants and 1:1 interviewees were very concerned that these four year olds would fall further behind their classmates.

There were also a few 1:1 interviewees who were concerned that a full day kindergarten program was too much for a child. There was also concern regarding children being too tired, or “wiped out” as one focus group participant stated and that all day kindergarten took away from family bonding time.

These concerns were definitely in the minority as most of the respondents felt that full day kindergarten was beneficial. One focus group participant stated: “There was a collective sigh of relief when full day K was introduced – especially because of financial concerns for some families.”

What resources are available for parents?

The following resources were cited by 1:1 interviewees and focus group participants as being available for parents:

- After care for kids – including a safe place for them to be after school – like the Y after school programs
- There are two different segments of kindergarten classes offered, so parents could choose what was best for them and their children
- The program that exists in Southington called “Grandparents Raising Grandchildren”
- The preschool programs offered throughout the community were identified as real supports to both parents and children.
- Family Resource Center Programs are a great support for parents and a way for isolated parents to connect with other parents of similarly-aged children.
- STEPS – a great resource for parents and children
- Youth Services is a great resource for families.

Additional Questions Asked During 1:1 Interviews

What could be done to improve services for families with young children in Health and Child Development?

This question elicited a number of responses from 1:1 interviewees regarding childhood obesity. There was a universal concern that childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions and that Southington is not immune from this issue. There was also consensus regarding the reasons behind this epidemic:

- Not enough exercise
- Too much time watching television
- Children don’t “go out and play anymore”
- Too much device time
- Better nutrition needed
- Children being unsupervised after school and snacking on junk food while watching television

Do you support the idea of the Town of Southington absorbing the Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington (ECCS) as a component of their Department of Youth Services?

There was a mixed response to this question, although most of the 1:1 interviewees felt that it would not be a good idea for Youth Services to absorb the ECCS. They felt the mission of ECCS would be lost within Youth Services and that the ECCS needed to be stand alone organization.

What do you think would be most important for donors to know about early childhood in Southington?

Most respondents felt that donors need to know that, as one respondent stated,

“There are two Southingtons – one for those families that have the resources to access the variety of programs and services and those that do not have the resources. Those children who do not have a preschool experience and enter school at age four and those children that have a quality preschool experience and maybe have had the luxury of their child entering kindergarten at age six.”

Donors need to know about this discrepancy and it was felt that the ECCS should have a clear focus of supporting those children most in need to close the achievement gap within this community.

Here are some potential ideas:

- Many respondents felt that the ECCS should have a clear message or “ask,” and then approach potential donors to address this issue. Sponsoring a two-week summer experience for incoming kindergarten students who did not have a preschool experience might be the perfect program focus for ECCS and it would have a profound effect on the students attending that program.
- Sponsor speakers or programs that address the income gap in this community and how this gap exacerbates the achievement gap.
- Have the ECCS send letters to the editor or write Op-Ed pieces for the local newspaper identifying the issues of young children and their families.

These are just a few ideas of the ways in which the ECCS could market itself to the community, as well as potential donors. Not only would the ECCS benefit from this approach, so would Southington’s youngest citizens.