William Penn Foundation Program Community Feedback Report I April 2024

Prepared by Harder+Company Community Research

The William Penn Foundation (WPF or "the Foundation") contracted with Harder+Company Community Research (H+Co) to gather community input to inform their new 10-year plan for supporting children and families in Philadelphia. The study reached 72 participants who shared feedback on topics such as public benefits, housing insecurity, family programming, early childhood education, out-of-school time programs, and more. The purpose of this engagement was to ensure that the new strategy is informed and shaped by those most impacted - families with young children and the providers who serve them.

This project was designed to collect perspectives on the strategy's focus and learn how the foundation's draft objectives and tactics resonated.

Participants included the following:

14   **Senior Leader** interviews

27   **Direct Line Provider** interviews

31   **Family** focus groups

Philadelphia Landscape

Participants provided insights into what community members see as currently in place and working or needing attention in Philadelphia.

👍 What is working

▶ Families have positive experiences with programs they are connected with and community-based programs are often supporting several of their needs.

▶ There are an abundance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs across Philadelphia that have deep community relationships.

▶ Out-of-school-time opportunities are playing an important role in extending learning experiences for youth.

👎 Common barriers

▶ Housing and housing insecurity is one of the biggest challenges facing Philadelphians.

▶ Public benefits do not adequately cover all of families' needs, as many families are still experiencing hardships, which makes meeting basic needs challenging and finding access to mental health support difficult.

▶ There is a lack of cultural and linguistic capacity broadly across several different services.

▶ Teacher recruitment and retention has become increasingly challenging.

Public Benefits

Comments on public benefits (housing assistance, SNAP, WIC, SSI) and tax credits

- Senior leaders and providers agreed that **families struggle to access and navigate systems due to a lack of information**. Both groups expressed the need for more support for families navigating systems. Families identified a critical gap in information specifically pertaining to **program availability and eligibility requirements**.

- Families suggested **expanding public benefits to include around-the-clock childcare services** for families with non-traditional working hours.

- Senior leaders and providers cautioned against expanding ineffective programs. Instead, they **recommended updating the antiquated application process for existing programs to be more user-friendly.**

- Senior leaders suggested offering **coaching programs to help providers refer families** to resources effectively.

- Families asked to **be included in community planning and designing policy** and capacity building initiatives.

Homelessness & Housing

Comments on preventing homelessness or housing insecurity for families with young children

- Senior leaders, providers, and families agreed that **housing insecurity is the greatest challenge** because the lack of safe and stable housing impacts all other areas of life and family well-being.

- Families suggested the need to **prioritize renovating vacant properties to provide affordable, long-term housing for families** as this would support those facing eviction or homelessness and increase the availability of affordable housing units overall.

- Providers and families recommended **subsidizing childcare and transportation** to ease short to medium-term financial burdens.

- Providers and families recommended promoting long-term stability through homeownership education, financial literacy, job training, mental health services, down payment/closing assistance, and emergency funding for utilities and food**.** Additionally, they recommended **offering centralized navigation services for families to access such benefits conveniently**.

- Senior leaders recommended **coordinating across organizations providing urgent funding** (e.g., cash assistance) to families, aiming for a centralized system to reduce family burden.

Two-Generation Family Programming

Comments on two-generation family programming

- Senior leaders and providers suggested the need for programming designed for **multi-generational households**.

- Providers emphasized a need to ensure organizations and programs are **representative of the community they serve.**

- Senior leaders and providers spoke about the **importance of providing supports and resources for parents** including prenatal care linkages, parenting education, basic needs and workforce supports, accessing resources, and guidance with helping their children with their schoolwork.

- Families also emphasized the value of these programs, particularly in **accessing resources like family field trips, parental support, and literacy assistance**.

- Providers and senior leaders noted that many programs already exist; however, **financial support/incentives (e.g., transportation passes, gift cards) are important for reducing participation barriers**. Relatedly, low-income families highlighted that these programs are not always accessible, and that **transportation, childcare, and meals should always be provided to reduce participation barriers**.

Mental & Behavioral Health

Comments on community-based mental and behavioral health services for children and caregivers

- Senior leaders and providers noted **mental and behavioral health services are critical for improving the well-being of families and children**.

- Senior leaders, providers, and families emphasized the **necessity for more education, professional development, and training on mental health for families and staff**, along with greater access to low-cost or free counseling services.

- Senior leaders and providers recommended identifying priority populations (e.g., homeless and food-insecure individuals) and **tailoring supports to families' unique needs (e.g., de-stigmatize mental health care** across generations and cultures, particularly for refugee/immigrant families).

- Senior leaders suggested prioritizing pilot programs and workforce development for educators and staff, **with emphasis on trauma-informed care.**

- Senior leaders and providers emphasized the **need for sustainable long-term funding and resources**, avoiding overburdening service providers to prevent burnout, staff turnover, and lapses in service quality.

- Senior leaders and providers emphasized the **need for innovative pilot services** tailored to the current generation of students.

Early Childhood Education

Comments on high-quality early childhood education

- Providers stressed the **importance of improving the quality and access of ECE options** in Philadelphia. They suggested considering **equity, reach of underserved populations (e.g., special needs education), and family support offerings as core components of quality**.

- Providers and senior leaders raised the need to **address teacher shortages** by **increasing wages** to increase teacher availability and retention, which in turn can reduce waitlists.

- Families shared that enrolling their child in ECE currently requires extra levels of effort because **the information related to registration deadlines are not readily available**.

- Providers and senior leaders suggested incorporating parent-to-parent coaching models that **promote community capacity building**.

- Providers and senior leaders shared there is an opportunity for **organizational capacity building** particularly around communication and decision-making processes between teaching and administrative staff to ensure decisions reflect teacher's voice.

Out-of-School Time Learning

Comments on high-quality out-of-school learning opportunities

- Senior leaders and providers agree that **there is a clear need to improve OST quality instead of creating more programs**.

- Providers stressed the resource challenges (e.g., transportation, housing, and flexible schedules) that many of their families face that make it difficult for them to prioritize OST opportunities; thus**, providing direct funds to families can help.**

- Senior leaders and families suggested the need to **expand the reach of Out of School Time (OST) programs**. Families noted **that children with special needs and disabilities need wrap around services that include OST**. Senior leaders suggested expanding to children ages 8-15 who often lack access and connection to learning opportunities outside the classroom.

- Families mentioned **traditional programs are limited** to school clubs but they have other needs (e.g., tutoring).

- Senior leaders proposed thoughtful **planning for cradle to college/training pipelines** by connecting classroom learning and OST opportunities.

- Providers **encourage the inclusion of parents/caregivers in OST opportunities** by highlighting the essential role they play in their child's success.

- Providers and senior leaders proposed a centralized system for enrollment that **considers language and technical accessibility**; prioritize simple, easy to use options besides internet-based technology, as well as **encourage expansion of language options** beyond English and Spanish.

- Providers and senior leaders suggested connecting with non-profit organizations, schools, and the City to **take a strategic approach and leverage existing strengths** and resources to meet families' needs in a more comprehensive and structural way.

Teacher Preparation & Retention

Comments on high-quality teacher preparation and retention programs

- Providers and senior leaders agreed that to expand access to early learning opportunities, **improving educator training opportunities and workforce retention is key**.

- Providers and senior leaders noted to encourage enrollment in training programs, **creating funding opportunities** to offset economic challenges associated with training and **increase educator wages to enhance later teacher retention will help**.

- Providers and senior leaders suggested **changes to policies** related to credential requirements (e.g., Master degree requirement to be a lead teacher) and consider competency-based approaches.

- Providers and senior leaders recommended **partnering with community members who may not currently be connected to teacher training programs** but are interested in working with children and have a strong skillset to do so (e.g., youth program leaders, community youth mentors).

- Providers and senior leaders suggested considering **early exposure opportunities** including classroom residencies and different types of careers within the field (e.g., leadership positions) as indicators of quality.

- Providers expressed the need to **leverage tenured teachers' experiences to promote mentorship models** for newer professionals and invest in their retention.

Additional Community Suggestions

If you were in charge, what would you do?

- ► "Push systemic changes including completely rethinking teachers time, staffing models because we keep trying to bring people into a broken system." -Sr. Leader

- ► "Setup afterschool and summer programs totally free for people to go to...and with certified teachers" -Provider

- ► "I'd focus on one thing at a time because trying to do it all at once will be overwhelming and may end up in disappointment." -Provider

- ► "Support mutually beneficial activities considering despite there being a lot of nonprofits in Philly, we haven't put a solid dent in the need...Supporting connectedness, collective impact approach" -Sr. Leader

What would make the biggest difference to families?

- ► "Having somewhere stable to live, job opportunities, and childcare" - Family respondent

- ► "Transportation would help" - Family respondent

- ► "Focus on hearing the stories of those who are in the predicament now and use our input to design the changes and solutions." - Family respondent

Overall Findings

- The overall input shared reflects general alignment between the experiences and expertise of those engaged and the focus of the objectives tested.

- The community feedback gathered indicates Philadelphia has a strong foundation for implementing the foundation's planned strategies over the next 10 years.

- Leveraging existing systems and focusing on strengthening existing successful elements to promote the feasibility and reach of the plan was a key theme across all focus areas.

- Areas of opportunity consisted of strengthening existing policies, programs, and opportunities for provider collaborations to catalyze collective impact.

- Ongoing community engagement to inform strategy implementation overtime was also a key emergent theme.

Participants

Senior Leaders contacted included Directors, Managers, University faculty, and others across the following organizations that were identified by WPF staff:
- Xiente
- Children's Playhouse; Latinos Educando Juntos
- Temple University
- University of Pennsylvania
- Community Legal Services
- Urban League of Philadelphia
- Jewish Family and Children's Services
- Kutamini Developmental Services
- Public Health Management Corporation
- City of Philadelphia Office of Children and Families

Providers contacted included ECE educators, lead teachers, supervisors, administrators, teacher-preparation program and instruction directors, literacy coaches, OST educators/managers, community engagement coordinators, home visitors, and navigators. Providers represented the following organizations:
- First Up
- Aspire to Inspire
- Kinder Academy
- Pratt Street Learning Center
- College Unbound
- Teach Plus
- Pennsylvania Key
- Read to Succeed
- Horizons at Greene St. Friends School
- Tree House Books
- Mighty Writers
- Reading Allowed
- Kutamani Developmental Services
- Public Health Management Corporation
- HopePHL
- Beautiful Womb

Families were contacted and recruited by providers who worked directly with them. These families represented the following organizations:
- Congreso de Latinos Unidos, Inc.
- Nationalities Service Center
- Connectedly
- Philadelphia Housing Authority
- St. Christopher's Hospital for Children