

Key Issues in Early Childhood Mental Health

Research has established the critical link between children's social and emotional development and their ability to enter school ready to learn. To help address this issue, the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board has been convening the Social and Emotional Well Being Interest Group (SEWBIG) as part of its School Readiness Initiative. SEWBIG is a forum for professionals and academics within the field of early childhood mental health to share new work and identify emerging challenges. SEWBIG group members reviewed **key barriers** to children and families accessing quality services and **areas of concern** related to children reaching full potential for school readiness. The following were identified as needing public action:

Screen all children to assure early identification of social and emotional concerns.

- ▶ Include screening for early mental health concerns in all health and developmental check-ups of infants and toddlers in doctor's offices and clinics.
- ▶ Conduct broad outreach for early childhood screening at age three. Ensure that a social and emotional screening is included.
- ▶ Increase reimbursement to medical providers and school districts for mental health screening to ensure that more children are screened and referred for needed mental health services.

Allocate additional resources for children and families.

- ▶ Ensure adequate resources are available to address identified concerns. Examples:
 - 1) Evaluation by mental health professionals
 - 2) On-site mental health services (professionals go to early childhood settings)
 - 3) High-quality child care settings that can address both child and family needs
- ▶ Ensure that parents are given information and support to access available resources. Examples:
 - 1) Assistance with referrals provided after screening
 - 2) Assistance completing applications for medical assistance, child care subsidy, etc.
 - 3) Culturally appropriate referrals including for new immigrant populations

Prepare child care providers to serve and support all children in high-quality settings.

- ▶ Support initiatives to adequately fund child care to ensure quality and stability. Examples:
 - 1) Providers who care for children with social and emotional issues need time for reflective practice and to plan for the individual needs of the children; however, inadequate resources in the child care system limit providers' ability to allow for this time and also lead to staff turnover.
 - 2) Children with special needs require stability in a trusted setting to make progress, but they often must withdraw abruptly when parents lose eligibility for assistance.
 - 3) Child care settings with higher provider/child ratios reduce opportunities for learning and interaction.
- ▶ Increase high-quality training for all child care staff, including center directors, regarding children's social and emotional development. Examples:
 - 1) Better understanding of normal development and training in addressing special needs could reduce the high rate of expulsion from child care centers.
 - 2) Relationships with others are the primary pathway for children's learning. Well-trained providers can play a vital role in supporting a child's relationships with adults and peers.

SEWBIG is funded by an FY04 federal Early Learning Opportunities Act grant provided to the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board. For more information, contact: Carol Miller, YCB Deputy Director for Early Childhood, 612-348-8983, carol.miller@co.hennepin.mn.us