



Berrien County

A partner of the
Early Childhood Investment Corporation

Strategic Plan

Great Start Collaborative – Berrien County

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Executive Summary

A Great Start for the Children of Berrien County

The members of the Great Start Collaborative of Berrien County are committed to having a positive impact on the lives of the young children and families living in our community. To that end, we have spent the last 18 months supporting our mission, and working toward a shared vision of what we can achieve.

Recent months have presented us with challenging external circumstances, such as the economic downturn and the difficult state budget process. But these challenges have also proven to be great opportunities to bring early childhood to the forefront. We've been offered countless opportunities to educate people about the importance of investing in our children. We've also been given the chance to strengthen our resolve and our commitment to the cause of the Great Start system. This document is proof of that commitment.

Mission

The purpose of Great Start is to assure a coordinated system of community resources and supports to assist all Berrien County families in providing a great start for their children from birth through age five.

Vision

A Great Start for every child in Berrien County: safe, healthy, and eager to succeed in school and in life.

Identified Issues

Through extensive quantitative and qualitative research and analysis, the Great Start Collaborative identified several major issues that are roadblocks to our young children being successful in school and in life. They include:

- Inadequate use of prenatal care, particularly within the underinsured
- Families not focusing on or understanding the importance of social and emotional development and well-being
- A lack of parental involvement and engagement – service providers feel that parents don't understand that they need to take an active role in issues related to their children, and that it's up to the provider to "fix" things
- The need for a broader community awareness of the importance of early childhood development
- A lack of knowledge of the programs that currently exist, on the part of both providers and parents
- Strong divisions between communities (racial divides, geographic divides, socio-economic divides)
- The need for a system for data collection and sharing
- The increasing lack of funding for programs

Plan of Attack

After we reviewed the findings of our research, the Great Start Collaborative wrestled with what to do to address the challenges before us. While we recognize that

this will be an ever-evolving process, we have developed nine goals that will guide the work of our GSC over the next three years.

We understand that certain strategies underneath these goals will cross between component areas, and therefore will take cooperation between our committees. This only makes our case for county-wide collaboration even stronger – we must all work together to achieve better results for our children.

We have specifically highlighted the following goals to focus on during our first year of implementation:

- Create an adequate and accessible support system for all pregnant women
- Raise community awareness of the importance of healthy social and emotional development
- Provide all children with a quality, research-based, formal or informal educational experience prior to Kindergarten
- Effectively disseminate information about family support programs
- Build and maintain strong GSC membership
- Develop data/evaluation tool to track impact of early childhood programs later into life

Great Start Collaborative Profile and History

Background

Berrien County has a long and rich history of collaboration around early childhood services. Formal collaboration began in 2000, when rising special education costs and a failed ASAP-PIE grant from the state of Michigan led the Berrien RESA to create an Early Childhood Department. Community-wide presentations by Dr. Bruce Perry and Carl Ill in 2003 helped to build public will around the importance of early learning and experiences. From this, Project Great Start Berrien was formed to determine what a great start for a Berrien County child looked like, and what services needed to be in place to assure that all children arrive at kindergarten healthy, safe, and eager to succeed in school and life. This group solidified our county's commitment to early childhood, and served as a valuable precursor to the Great Start Collaborative (GSC).

GSC Structure and Leadership

The Berrien County Great Start Collaborative received its start-up funding in April 2008. At that point, representatives from Berrien RESA and the United Way of Southwest Michigan began to recruit members for the board. The Director, Rachel Wade, was hired in June and was chosen based on her business background, her commitment to the community, and her experience as a parent of two young children. The decision was made to hire the GSC Director as an employee of the United Way. This was to ensure that the GSC is not tied to any particular service-providing agency, thereby allowing the GSC to have an objective viewpoint.

The first GSC board meeting was held June 2008 with all board members in attendance except one who was on medical leave. Since that time meeting attendance has been strong, particularly among key players in the community. In addition, we have received a high level of buy-in from some non-traditional members of the GSC, such as Michigan Works and the Family Court. We also have very active parent members on the GSC.

Our GSC meets as an independent group every other month for two hours. We have seven committees – one for each point of the star, a communications committee, and an executive committee. Our GSC is particularly interested in action, therefore our meetings going forward will be a combination of reports and working break-out sessions.

Parent Coalition

Two Parent Liaisons – Holly Wingard for north county and Sara Tisdale for south county – were hired November 2008. Sara Tisdale resigned in February 2009 and the decision was made to not fill her position. Considering the deep sense of division between the two segments of the county, we felt it was best to move forward with one Liaison who would focus on bringing parents together from all over Berrien County to create a united front.

Under Holly's leadership, the Coalition has steadily grown not only in numbers but in level of commitment. In the Spring of 2009, members of the Parent Coalition collected over 600 signatures on legislative petitions that were presented to all of our state legislators by the 19 people from Berrien County who attended the Star Power Rally in Lansing. Our group's strong focus on advocacy has made the Berrien County Great Start Parent Coalition one of the leading models in our region.

Events and Impact

The Great Start Collaborative and Parent Coalition have made it a priority to have a strong presence in Berrien County. Over the last year we have participated in many community events and ongoing community groups and initiatives, including:

- Berrien County Youth Fair
- Tri-County Head Start Fun Fair
- Parents as Teacher playgroups and events
- Berrien County Community Services Round Table and Niles Area Community Roundtable
- United Way rallies at the corporate headquarters for Whirlpool
- Human Services Coordinating Council
- Raising Up Health Babies Taskforce
- One Southwest Michigan One Community poverty reduction initiative
- Childcare center directors meetings
- Systems of Care teams for children with severe emotional disturbances and children with developmental disabilities

Our GSC has become deeply involved in some community projects that would not have been as thoroughly developed if our multi-disciplinary input has not been included. One such project is the development of an early childhood development center in Benton Harbor. While this project is still in its infancy, the GSC has been ideally suited to take the lead in helping bring this dream to fruition. Our focus on all aspects of a child's development – beyond just traditional forms of education – has enabled this project to expand its definition of development to become truly comprehensive.

One key role that our GSC has played in our community is that of education and advocacy. The state's current budget crisis has made each and every state-funded program have to defend its worth, and the GSC has been able to assist several crucial programs in doing just that. When funding for Nurse Family Partnership, Great Parents Great Start, and the GSC itself were threatened, we rallied our GSC and Parent Coalition members to contact our legislators to fight for them. Whether or not the funding is preserved, we have educated innumerable people within our community as to the vital importance of these programs, and in relation, the vital importance of investing in our young children as a whole.

Another important opportunity for the GSC was to be included in discussions that the United Way conducted regarding funding allocations. The GSC Director

provided information regarding specific community needs in the area of early childhood education. She also shared what was happening at the state level regarding funding. This provided the community investment team with a global perspective and a deeper understanding of where they needed to direct their financial support.

One last area of importance for our GSC was the hiring of Erika Oliver, a consultant who facilitated our focus group and strategic planning processes. Through her time and expertise we were able to reach out to community groups who had never been involved in this kind of process in relation to early childhood before. The diverse range of perspectives that we gathered proved invaluable during our strategic planning sessions. More importantly, it gave us the opportunity to create and build buy-in with non-traditional partners who could prove to be crucial as we implement our strategic plan.

Strategic Analysis Findings

When we began looking at each element of the *Local Early Childhood System Assessment* we identified the following questions that we needed to pay particular attention to:

- What can we do with the resources we currently have?
- How can we work together in new ways to achieve different/better results?
- How can we address the needs of the full county while acknowledging the extreme conditions in Benton Harbor?

We also knew that we would have to keep in mind the following things:

- There is some overlap between the five points of the star, and each component area impact every other area in some way.
- We need to create doable goals so that we can achieve a track record of success and breed a feeling of hope.

Community Conditions

Learnings from Data Analysis

- Our child poverty rate is one of the highest in the state, and that is unacceptable
- There is a disturbing disparity in child poverty between white children and children of color – compared to white children, almost 5 times as many black children and almost 3 times as many Hispanic children live in poverty

Learning From Strategic Review

- Our community suffers from chronic, generational poverty, and there is little motivation or sense of personal responsibility to rise above the circumstances
- There is an understanding across many of our focus groups that early education could have a positive impact
- Chronic, generational poverty is at the heart of many of our issues
- Not all people/families have access to education, affordable housing and child care, and parenting support services
- There is an overall feeling of hopelessness within Benton Harbor that leads to teens making poor decisions

For information about goals and strategies for this section, please see the Family Support section of this document.

Pediatric and Family Health

Learnings from Data Analysis

- Since 2002 there has been a steady increase in the percentage of women who receive less than adequate prenatal care, and we have the 3rd lowest % of women receiving adequate prenatal care in the state
- Since 2003 there has been an increase in the number of Medicaid-Eligible 1 and 2 year olds tested for lead - While there has been a decrease in the number who are lead poisoned, we have the 3rd highest % of children who are lead poisoned in the state
- Since 2004 there has been an increase in the number of toddlers being immunized, but we have the 8th lowest % in the state
- Since 2003 there has been an increase in the number of children insured by Medicaid
- Since 2002 there has been a decrease in our infant mortality rate, and the disparity gap between infant deaths in white babies and babies of color has closed significantly
- Since 2002 there has been a slight decrease in teen pregnancy and repeat teen pregnancy, but we have the 6th highest percentage of repeat births to teens in the state

Learnings from Strategic Review

- Few obstetric providers accept Medicaid resulting in a lack of access to prenatal care
- Many mothers, especially teen mothers, don't understand or acknowledge the value of prenatal care
- Almost 1/3 of the homes in Berrien County are pre-1950s – even though our lead poisoning rates are going down there is still a lot of work to do
- Parents need more education, both pros and cons, about immunizations

Learnings from Infrastructure Review

- Communication across industry, programs, and services needs to improve
- Certain organizations have a plethora of information, but it does not get broadly shared
- Funding streams for programs are different and have strict requirements, which is a barrier to providing shared professional development
- Engaging parents, building public will, and strategic communications have been long-time challenges
- Raising and leveraging funds is a challenge, particularly due to a lack of funds available

Goals and Strategies

Goal: Increase utilization of prenatal care within patients that are on Medicaid

- Strategies:
- 1) Develop incentive program for Medicaid patients to attend prenatal care appointments
 - 2) Develop incentive program for providers to accept Medicaid patients

Social and Emotional Health

Learnings from Data Analysis

- The rate of children in foster care in Berrien County has been rising since 2003
- Berrien County has the lowest % of children ages 0-3 receiving public mental health services in the state, and we have the 4th lowest % of children ages 4-6 receiving public mental health services – Yet we have the 5th largest number in the state of children K-2 identified with “emotionally impaired” as their primary disability
- There is very little data to help us define social-emotional issues

Learnings from Strategic Review

- Mental health needs are difficult to determine under age 5
- Mental health concerns need to be addressed within the family, especially with the parents
- We need more data or specific outcome measurements
- Social emotional skills (self control, resiliency, handling conflict, feeling safe, positive interactions, self esteem) are some of the most important aspects of child development yet tend to be the things we as a community pay the least attention to and provide the least funding for
- There are many barriers to social-emotional health services, including Medicaid coverage, parent involvement, and social stigmas

Learnings from Infrastructure Review

- Collaboration between early childhood service providers is strong
- Need to expand collaboration to business and industry
- Great Start Collaborative has helped improve collaboration, data sharing, parent engagement, public will building, and strategic communications
- Need to investigate more shared training, particularly across agencies and online opportunities
- Need to pursue blended funding

Goals and Strategies

Goal: Raise community awareness of the importance of healthy social and emotional development

Strategies: 1) Launch media campaign
2) Use childcare centers to disseminate information regarding social and emotional development to parents

Goal: Implement a county-wide social-emotional curriculum from birth through high-school

Strategies: 1) Create plan to develop buy-in among all involved providers
2) Identify what, if any, social-emotional curriculums are currently in use

- 3) Conduct needs assessment to determine which curriculum will be chosen
- 4) Develop funding plan to purchase curriculum

Goal: Increase social and emotional health in families

Strategies: 1) Launch Parent Café pilot

Child Care and Early Education

Learnings from Data Analysis

- Berrien County has the 4th highest percentage of children ages 0-2 who could have a developmental delay, but less than half of them are served by Early On
- Berrien County has a large number of families not using licensed child care but using relative/aid care

Learnings from Strategic Review

- A low educational level for parents leads to a lower rate of children participating in early educational opportunities – parents don't understand the value
- There are many barriers to early education including cost and transportation
- There is great concern about the high number of children in unlicensed childcare
- The most at-risk parents are reluctant to enroll in home visitation programs because they fear being reported to Child Protective Services
- Parents don't know about services, or if they do know about them they don't know which programs are high quality
- Middle income families also experience financial and logistical barriers to quality childcare and preschool

Learnings from Infrastructure Review

- Desire to collaborate exists
- Need to build trust among organizations and develop understanding that we are stronger together
- Need to pursue common database of information
- Need to pursue professional development opportunities that meet logistical challenges of child care providers
- Engaging working parents and parents in south county continues to be a struggle
- Need to explore media support (tv/radio/online)
- Agencies work to raise and leverage funds independently, but not collectively

Goals and Strategies

Goal: All children will have a quality, research-based, formal or informal educational experience prior to Kindergarten

Strategies: 1) Work with Child Care Resources and the Consortium for Community Development to develop a resource hub in Benton Harbor for relative and aid providers that receive the DHS child care subsidy
2) Develop child care resource packet for HR Directors to give to expecting employees
3) Create and publicize network of informal educational experiences

Parenting Leadership

Learnings From Data Analysis

- Since 2003 there has been an increase in mothers who don't have high school diplomas (the 9th highest % in the state)
- While both figures have gone down in recent years, Berrien County still has a high rate of teen births and repeat teen births (6th highest % of repeat teen births in the state)

Learnings from Strategic Review

- We need more realistic sex education
- Women/girls need goals and a vision for their lives, and the motivation to achieve them
- We need a stronger focus on developing positive parenting skills – we have no universal parenting education programs and minimal education for at-risk families
- We need to focus on building strong families with a particular emphasis on the roles of fathers
- Teen pregnancy has had a tremendous impact on our community

Learnings from Infrastructure Review

- Collaboration happens as long as it meets an organizations needs
- Organizations need to set aside individual agendas and create a shared vision
- Data is collected but not shared, and not always used to set goals
- Need to pursue opportunities to “train the trainer”
- Parent engagement needs to be a comprehensive focus – work on their motivation and build trust to eliminate fear
- Great Start Collaborative has greatly increased public will building and strategic communications

Goals and Strategies

Goal: Effectively disseminate information about family support programs
Strategies: 1) Develop orientation tool for front line providers to educate them on community programs and resources
2) Develop understanding of 211 system
3) Update county resource directory and develop comprehensive plan for dissemination

Goal: Decrease teen pregnancy rate
Strategies: 1) Assess strategies/programs currently being implemented
2) Investigate best practices from other counties
3) Develop and implement plan

Family Support

Learnings from Data Analysis

- Rates of abuse and neglect have been rising since 2003
- Number of children on FIP and FAP has been rising since 2003
- Unemployment is rising

Learnings from Strategic Review

- Children are a product of their environment, and many of them are living in environments that are not positive, loving, or supportive
- The actual number of children being abused and neglected could be much higher than what is reported, and those numbers will continue to rise as the economy continues to suffer
- Support systems exist outside of government assistance, but they are seeing a higher volume of people and resources are becoming more scarce

Learnings from Infrastructure Review

- Still unsure how these players fit into GSC
- Need to better publicize county-wide outcomes
- Great Start Collaborative needs to keep members updated on opportunities to raise and leverage funds – then use that as a way to build buy-in from community

Goals and Strategies

Goals and strategies for this component area were not specifically developed for a number of reasons. First and foremost, there are a number of other community groups that are tackling many of these issues identified in this component area, and we felt that work was best left up to them. Our plan is to have GSC representation in these groups to help bridge the gap and offer our support. Second, the goals that were proposed were weak compared to those that came out of the other component areas, and the GSC gave this group's goals very low priorities.

Overall Board and Infrastructure Development

Learnings from Data Analysis

- There is very little data for certain component areas
- Some of the data has little meaning without making comparisons or placing it in some kind of context – and data for those comparisons may not exist or is difficult to get
- We need to look at data beyond what is provided by Kids Count, but even that local data is often difficult to access, if it even exists
- Data is old and often no longer relevant

Learnings from Strategic Review

- The resources that are available to families are different in each community within the county – support systems that are available in one place are not in another
- The general community does not understand the depth of the problems that exist, but it takes an entire community to raise a child
- Problems go across socio-economic lines, but we tend to focus most of our energy on low-income communities
- There is a lot of territorialism amongst agencies, and amongst communities
- Parental involvement and engagement is key at all levels
- We need better tie-ins and linkages as children move from one program to another (i.e. - from Pre-K to Kindergarten)
- As a community we have focused a lot on symptoms, but not causes – addressing some of the causes would have broad-reaching impacts

Learnings from Infrastructure Review

- Our GSC has strong leadership
- We have good communication and relationships among and between GSC members
- Members are committed to this process and understand the benefit to their own organizations
- We need additional members at the table to accomplish the work we've set for ourselves (pediatrician, diverse parents, and representatives from Berrien County Association of Churches, Pregnancy Care Center, Whirlpool, and local school districts)
- Roles, guidelines, and processes need to be more clearly defined
- Lack of funding, staff, materials, and time are our biggest challenges that we must address to implement any kind of change
- Data collection, measurement, and sharing between agencies and across components does not often happen because it isn't identified as anyone's responsibility

- Professional development opportunities between agencies and across components does not often happen because it isn't identified as anyone's responsibility
- The Parenting Leadership, Social and Emotional Health, and Child Care and Early Education components have had success with engaging parents, but the Family Support and Pediatric and Family Health components have not been as successful
- Building public will and utilizing strategic communications has not been a major focus although we know the need is there

Goals and Strategies

Goal: Build and maintain strong GSC membership

Strategies: 1) Expand GSC membership to include leaders from groups necessary to complete our work (pediatrician, diverse parents, and representatives from Berrien County Association of Churches, Pregnancy Care Center, Whirlpool, and local school districts)
 2) Review and revise operating guidelines
 3) Assist GSC members with creating guidelines/policies to ingrain GSC work into their organizations

Goal: Build public will and support for early childhood programs and investments

Strategies: 1) Increase legislative advocacy efforts
 2) Use committee strategies to highlight benefits of early childhood

Goal: Develop formal system for data sharing and tracking

Strategies: 1) Create process for sharing what each agency currently collects and tracks
 2) Create process for collecting additional data that is needed
 3) Create process for long-term data tracking

Action Agenda

Financing & Fund Development

Berrien County's Great Start Collaborative is committed to utilizing the current available resources to carry out the strategic plan and to create additional resources with the intent of sustainability. With that vision, it is imperative that action items are attended to purposefully.

With the state budget still not completed, the future of many of the programs and services represented on the GSC are in question. Those programs that do survive will most likely face drastic funding reductions. With this in mind, we have tried to develop goals and strategies that will not require extensive amounts of additional funds. Many of our objectives center around how we can work together to strengthen our programs without having to utilize additional funds.

The key to our success will be staff support provided by the organizations represented on the GSC. We will work to build the understanding that everyone will win if our goals are achieved, and that the individual success of any organization can be enhanced by directly supporting the work of the GSC.

The first step in creating any lasting change is to organize the resources currently available into a viable and sustainable system. The next step is to assess any gaps and duplicate services. The last step is to create a plan to build a comprehensive system. Involving all community stakeholders in these three steps will create the buy-in needed to uncover funding options as we collaboratively create and implement our goals.

Appendix

Strategic Planning Process

The Berrien County GSC strategic planning process began prior to the receipt of ECIC funding. Claudia Vescolani, Berrien County Early Childhood Supervisor was instrumental in bringing Dr. Bruce Perry to speak to Berrien County leaders and early childhood professionals. Claudia assembled people, contacted consultants to secure participation and expertise for the process in preparation of readiness for ECIC funding.

The formal process began with data compilation and conducting focus groups across the wide demographic and geographic spectrum of Berrien County. The Strategic review took place over two days to accommodate professional schedules and enhance participation. Retreat attendees included board members, social service agencies, government representatives, law enforcement professionals and parents to review the data and make recommendations. A third party was hired to facilitate the process to avoid agency or individual bias, engage all members and further the team's bonding and communication. The steps of the strategic planning process are outlined in detail in the following narrative.

Quantitative Data

The Berrien County Great Start Collaborative strategic planning process began with Kids Count data. The GSC Director and strategic review consultant participated in a telephone technical assistance meeting explaining the early childhood indicators. Charts and graphs were created for many data points to enhance their "readability" for focus group participants.

Each indicator, visually depicted with a graph/chart or shared numerically, was discussed with at least one focus group with the goal of discussing each point twice with demographically different groups. "Unusual" and usual suspects were chosen to review each point. In other words, people without expertise in a component area as well as people with expertise were asked for their feedback. This approach was taken to spark creativity for new ideas and information.

Qualitative Data

While discovering the "story behind the story" in focus group sessions, participants were asked for their "solutions" to identified problems. These problem solving conversations were critical in providing specific feedback to the GSC committee and community members involved in planning as the suggestions were often from people most affected by the problem.

Focus groups involved parents, social service employees, students, education professionals, medical workers and the faith-based community. Berrien County is geographically diverse with rural and urban areas. Care was taken to conduct focus groups in and across the county. In most social service endeavors the majority of attention is concentrated in the Benton Harbor region as it has the highest poverty rates. For the purposes of creating a community-wide effort, however, each county area was given equal attention.

Demographic information was captured at each focus group to determine the gender, parent status, age, family income, race, and education of the participants. In addition, each focus group participant was given a comments sheet to record information that they did not want to share with the group, information that was not covered or detailed information to supplement the discussion. A summary of the demographic information and a sample comment form are included in the Appendix.

It proved difficult to convene business and government leadership groups so an on-line survey was employed using the Survey Monkey tool. The response rate was good and the Director felt that many honest responses were collected that might not have been shared in a face-to-face setting. The responses are included in the qualitative information section. Focus groups were conducted over the winter months and inclement weather may have contributed to low attendance at some groups.

The most telling lessons from the focus groups were 1) attendees welcomed an opportunity to share and feel heard, 2) community members are concerned about others and want the best for Berrien County, 3) many shared efforts and “helping” initiatives, formal and informal, are taking place. The focus groups offered shared space to voice concerns and positive energy to create solutions.

One specific example of the synergy created from this process is the “saving” of the Nurse-Family Partnership program. Funding for this highly successful, best practice program was eliminated in the State Budget proposal just prior to the strategic review retreat. Several groups met to join forces and resources to save the program. They did not dwell on the loss or lay blame, but got right to work creating collaborations and refiguring the program plan to ensure continuation.

Strategic Review Retreat

The Berrien County Great Start Collaborative strategic review retreat was held on two half days, one morning session and one afternoon session, to accommodate various schedules. Twenty-four attendees participated in team building, data analysis, assets review, goals setting and implementation planning. Attached is a list of the retreat participants, their affiliation or representation, and their assigned component area.

At the first session participants were greeted with a hot lunch and provided a binder with a full copy of the quantitative data and the qualitative data, which were organized by category for ease of use during small group work. In order to gain full focus and be open to new information, the attendees took part in a perspective shifting exercise. Throughout the afternoon, many referred back to this exercise when explaining how they developed their goals.

Review of the quantitative data, focus group feedback, small group discussion and setting priorities resulted in a goal poster for each component area. The teams used words, pictures, sayings and symbols to depict goals for each component area. It was evident that community members’ suggestions and perspectives from the focus group discussions were respected and incorporated by the planning members. In this way, an even broader range of community members participated in the formal planning session beyond the actual retreat attendees.

Team members in each small group put a puzzle together and were challenged to look for resources outside their comfort zone to help all teams complete the task. Through this exercise they were able to see that there are more resources available than what is visible at first glance.

The second day, a morning session, began with a hot breakfast and revisiting the work of the previous session. A Star Power video was shown and introductions made. The same teams reconvened to create strategies for each goal and an implementation schedule (objectives) for each strategy. Attendees took part in a collaborative exercise omitting the words I, me, my, and mine. They learned to use “we” to focus on the other person and discussed how often the focus is on maintaining our own comfort zone.

After hearing each team’s strategies and objectives, the participants took part in a straw poll deciding which goals to implement first. There were similar goals across areas showing the relationship of the components to each other. One team had already assigned tasks and taken responsibility to move forward on a strategy. In fact, several teams showed action toward goals and accepted personal responsibility to move the initiative forward.

A final discussion of important vs. urgent cemented the Collaborative’s commitment to putting energy behind the Berrien Great Start Collaborative work. The team members discussed how those things “important” can be pushed aside for things “urgent” or appearing important. Intentional energy and attention must be committed to a long-term process of behavior change and system restructure and enhancement necessary to create an early childhood system.

The goals identified with their corresponding votes are as follows:

1. Effectively disseminate parent support information (20 votes) [Parenting Leadership]
2. Create a common definition that everyone understands when referring to children’s social-emotional health (17 votes) [Social and Emotional Health]
3. Decrease teen pregnancy (16 votes) [Parenting Leadership]
4. Strengthen community knowledge of early childhood services and make entry into services easier (16 votes) [Child Care & Early Education]
5. Implement county-wide social emotional curriculum from birth through high school (13 votes) [Social and Emotional Health]
6. Adequate and accessible support system for all women (13 votes) [Pediatric and Family Health]
7. Safe and affordable housing for all children (12 votes) [Family Support]
8. Eliminate lead poisoning (11 votes) [Pediatric and Family Health]
9. All children feel safe from harm (9 votes) [Family Support]
10. Parents and caregivers have tools and resources to access healthy choices (4 votes) [Family Support]
11. Special needs children (2 votes) [Child Care & Early Education]

Each participant signed a pledge to support the Berrien County Great Start Collaborative. Each pledge was mailed to the participant as a permanent reminder of

their commitment to early childhood education and the strategic review team effort. Evaluations completed showed that the participants felt the day was very productive and their primary request was to stay the collaborative course. The most important lessons learned were:

- ✓ Additional data, such as the rate of homelessness and availability of housing, is needed for decision making and resource allocation
- ✓ Definitions and lay language are necessary to engage more people and work toward common goals
- ✓ More people's input is needed (such as housing professionals)
- ✓ Input from parents is critical as witnessed by those teams with parent participants
- ✓ Those represented realized all components are connected and *want* collaboration
- ✓ Generational poverty will be need to be addressed for sustainable change
- ✓ Action and success, however small, is needed for the group to maintain momentum
- ✓ Collaborative meeting structure should be changed to allow for small group interaction and work on the identified strategies and objectives

Strategic Plan Document

Assessment information, strategic review work product, and GSC committee leadership have created this final strategic plan. Through one-on-one interviews with GSC committee members and staff, GSC Executive Committee meetings, and GSC committee board meetings this document has been crafted. The decision criteria for goals and strategies are:

- ✓ Increases quality of an existing program or service.
- ✓ Improves service delivery and administration.
- ✓ Impacts the whole county.
- ✓ Doable with current resources.

With these criteria in mind, the first focus of the Berrien County GSC will be to disseminate parenting information to parents, future parents, family members and the general community. The Collaborative, Director, Parent Liaison, and consultant, Erika K. Oliver worked together to organize the final strategic plan document. The goal of the document creation was to satisfy the needs of ECIC and create a working document to be used as a road map for implementation. To this end, the Goals and Strategies section have been combined with the Action Agenda to create a working timeline. This grid will allow the GSC committee and any subcommittees or work groups to track and evaluation progress toward each goal. The goals and strategies were crafted with a 3-year timeline but the implementation grid was developed to reflect yearly progress and re-evaluation. Berrien County Great Start Collaborative intends to proceed with implementation regardless of availability of any new resources.