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## FSA prioritizes needs for central Orange County

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The Family Success Alliance on Wednesday night shared preliminary data gathered from 68 survey responses collected in central Orange County between I-40 and I-85.

The region, known as Zone 4 to the Family Success Alliance, is one of two pilot zones selected to begin work in creating a pipeline that supports children from the cradle to college or a career.

Mayor Tom Stevens thanked those for their interest in the community's needs and for their work to meet those needs.



"It's not right if the things that make us a cool town and a great place to live are not available to everyone," he said.

To gather the data, volunteers went door-to-door administering surveys, and the survey was also available online.

Input was received from youth, parents, community leaders and service providers, said Meredith McMonigle of the Orange County Health Department.

Focus groups also had discussions about needs in the community. Groups included a group of service providers, a group of Latina mothers and a group of middle school girls.

Allison Young of the Orange County Health Department and Jennifer Walters, a social work researcher at RTI, presented some of the trends found from the data.

Many families surveyed expressed a need for early childhood resources, such as easier access to child care.

EOG scores also showed potential problems within schools. The average third-grade reading proficiency for Zone 4 was 19 percentage points lower than the average third-grade reading level across the entire school district.

However, Walters said, most parents surveyed did feel that students were supported when in school.

They also felt the district offered a wide variety of after-school programs, although parents cited several challenges that inhibited participation: cost, transportation and lack of communication — meaning that parents simply don't know what's available to their children.

Some of the challenges were specific to the Hispanic and Latina community.

New Hope Elementary, a school within Zone 4, currently has a student body that is 42 percent Hispanic or Latina. This may suggest a shift in the demographics of the population.

But many Latina mothers expressed concern about communicating with their children's schools and about transportation. If they were to take their children to afterschool activities, they said they would be afraid of getting stopped by the police in routine traffic stops.

Sandra Blefko, ESL family outreach specialist for Orange County Schools, said she was not surprised by the data presented and that many of the families she works with voice similar concerns.

“That’s probably why (parents are) not that involved,” she said. “Not that they don’t care. They just don’t know how.”

Once the data had been presented, McMonigle asked the crowd gathered to help prioritize the trending problems that had been drawn from the survey responses.

The themes listed were: transportation, support for Latino families, college and career preparation, readiness for kindergarten, mentoring, childcare, out of school time, family support and academic support.

Those in the audience were allowed to vote for what they felt were the most pressing needs for their community. Each person was allotted 10 votes and could not use more than four votes for any single topic.

Once all the votes had been cast, four needs came out on top: transportation, childcare, readiness for kindergarten and support for Latino families.

Individuals were then voted to cast votes for suggested strategies to meet these needs — or to suggest their own strategies.



The crowd voted for the following strategies or solutions:

— Transportation: Expand existing bus services, allow more transportation for after-school or summer programs

- Child care: Increase child care subsidies
- Readiness for kindergarten: Expand Pre-K enrollment
- Support for Latino families: Provide more opportunities for Latino parents to learn English.

McMonigle said the votes and the written suggestions would be taken into account as the Family Success Alliance continues to compile data.

Surveys will still be received for another two weeks, and McMonigle said the alliance plans to continue surveying in future years as time passes and needs shift.

“We’re here. We’re staying. We’re committed,” she said of the relatively new initiative.

A similar meeting — with a different set of data that reflects the needs of Zone 6, or Chapel Hill and Carrboro — will be held Thursday, April 9 at Carrboro Elementary School from 5 to 7 p.m. Child care and a light meal will be provided.

The priorities chosen from both zones will be presented at a meeting of the Family Success Alliance Advisory Council on April 20 from 1 to 2:30 p.m. The meeting will be held at the Carrboro Century Center, and it is open to the public.

