Onondaga Citizens League
meeting notes—April 18, 2013

Meeting held at ProLiteracy, 104 Marcellus St., Syracuse

Co-chairs: Paul Predmore and Laurie Black

Presenters: Joan Royle, Success by Six; Rebeccah Heberle, Head Start; Peggy Liuzzi, Child Care Solutions; Marie Perkins, Syracuse City School District Early Childhood Programs; Ginny Carmody, Literacy Coalition.

OCL: Sandra Barrett and Becky Sernett

Summary: Today's meeting served as an introduction to the OCL's 2013 study topic of early childhood education. Local organizations representing major early childhood education practitioners in Onondaga County provided brief synopses of their organizations' work and the challenges they face. A question and answer period followed.

Introduction:
The 2013 OCL study topic allows Central New York to become part of the national conversation on early childhood education, said OCL co-chair Laurie Black. "When we talk about early childhood education, we talk about our most valuable assets," she said.

Early childhood education refers to the programs, initiatives and activities (almost "everything under the sun," Black said) available to children from birth to five years (the typical age at which children enter kindergarten is around 5 years old). The meeting today is the first step in studying, "What are we doing as a community?"

Study Process:
OCL executive director Sandra Barrett provided an overview of the study process. Committee members take active part in brainstorming, researching, investigating, evaluating, discussing and reporting on the study topic. The forms these investigations and conversations take vary. There may be panel discussions, interviews with experts, formal and informal surveys, online research, and then once it seems as if the relevant information and data have been collected, the committee conducts its analysis, offering findings and recommendations. The process includes a written report, in which the study results are shared with the community.

Key Practitioners:
A panel of experts representing some of the major early childhood education providers in Central New York presented brief overviews of their organizations and the challenges they face.

Success by 6—Joan Royle, executive director of Success by 6, which is managed by

the United Way of Central New York, began the conversation by saying Success by 6 takes a holistic approach to early childhood education. Programs focus on such areas as: literacy, parent education, health, nutrition, public policy, child safety and even the economic value of early childhood education. The United Way provides scholarships for children to attend day care and funding for child care programming.

Royle says one of the challenges the community faces is in the development of a "common tool" to evaluate school readiness. Kindergarten screenings vary from district to district, and so children are not being evaluated in the same way. Some districts use the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), others test children with the AIMSWeb Test of Early Literacy, and then some schools focus mostly on gross motor and emotional/social skills. A grant from the CNY Foundation is helping the United Way to study school readiness and to develop a common tool.

Head Start/Early Head Start—Onondaga County's Head Start and Early Head Start programs for children in low-income families are administered by P.E.A.C.E. Inc. Rebeccah Heberle, the programs' executive director, said Head Start focuses on the social, emotional and cognitive development of children from birth to age five, plus pregnant women. Participating families must meet income eligibility guidelines and programs are offered at no cost to them. Early Head Start helps children from birth to three years of age, and there are 214 slots available in Onondaga County. Programs are offered in day care, home and correctional facility settings. There are half-day and all-day programs. Head Start, which assists children from 3 to 5 years of age, has 863 available slots. The majority of programs are offered in collaboration with local day care centers, but there are also some home-based programs available; full and partial-day programs are offered. Head Start/Early Head Start assists a total of 1,077 children in Onondaga County. With more than 250 staff, the Central New York programs are among the largest in the state.

Child Care Solutions—Peggy Liuzzi, executive director, said early childhood programs represent a "patchwork of care" for working families. Child Care Solutions aims to help parents, families and children in Onondaga and Cayuga counties navigate this "very large delivery system" by offering resources and child care referral services. "Families just want care for kids that include educational opportunities," she said, and they find many difficulties getting the care they need. Programs traditionally operate during the school day and school year, but parents work year-round and sometimes in rotating shifts. As a result, children are moved around from program to program, and the quality of these programs is "all over the map." Some of them are "wonderful" and others are "marginal". "Quality is what matters," she said. "Children are learning every part of their day."

Child Care Solutions also helps providers improve their quality of care. A newly implemented initiative is QualityStars NY, a quality rating and improvement system for preschool and childcare programs in Central New York. More than 40 local

providers participate in the rating system, which Liuzzi said encourages providers to improve their quality of care. Resources, training and support are made available to providers to make improvements to their early childhood education programs and maintain their high ratings and achieve a high rating.

Syracuse City School District Early Childhood Programs—More than 1,600 students are served by the SCSD's Early Childhood Programs (based in schools and in collaborations with child care centers), according to director Marie Perkins. Programs include: universal pre-k, inclusion, early intervention and an early childhood evaluation center. Half- and full-day programs are available. The SCSD would like to "expand full day to as many kids as possible," Perkins said. The SCSD is doing more collaborations with community providers to educate and care for district children. And this year, the SCSD is working with new curricula that is being tested and further developed by teachers.

The district would like school-based programs to be as integrated into the full school setting as possible. "We want the school to look at it as another grade level," she said. "Pre-k has been very separate for a long time." Many school principals are "embracing it," she said.

A new centralized registration center (which all school-aged programs in the district use) allows better coordination of communication to parents about what early childhood education opportunities are available (school-based or a child-care center).

The district also works to develop relationships with families to keep parents as involved as possible in their child's early education. In a recent survey of parents, the SCSD learned that lack of transportation and insufficient numbers of full-day pre-K slots kept some parents from registering their children in a pre-k program with the district.

Defining "school readiness" continues to be a challenge. There are many assessment tools, and the SCSD would like a common tool. According to Perkins, 73% of the students who graduate from the SCSD's pre-k programs are ready for school. "Kids are making progress," she said. The district is working on collecting more data and also to educate people who can advocate for early childhood education so the district can obtain more funding.

In late May, the SCSD will hold a "transition summit," which will give pre-k teachers and administrators an idea of what happens in kindergarten so they can best prepare children.

Literacy Coalition—"We cannot focus on zero to five without a parental component," said Ginny Carmody, executive director of the Literacy Coalition, a community

literacy initiative funded in part by the CNY Community Foundation. This is why the initiative focuses on the dual generations of parent and child.

According to a 2012 report released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, if a child is poor, lives in a poor neighborhood and does not read well by third grade, he or she is "17 times less likely to graduate [high school] than students with none of those risks." Parents, schools, the community—all of these factors contribute to a student's readiness, Carmody said.

"Early literacy has proven to be a reliable indicator of a child's future success in school," she said. The coalition focuses on two outcome indicators: improving the number of children ready for kindergarten and increasing the number of children who are read to daily.

Two major coalition programs include the Imagination Library (which provides books and collects data on students' reading progress) and literacy champion grants (which provides funding to literacy programs). The Imagination Library focuses its efforts on children in three zip codes: 13203, 13204 and 13208. "Nearly half of the children from these zones have historically entered school without being ready to read," Carmody said.

Question and Answer Period:

During the open comment section of the meeting, a list of questions/focus areas was generated. The list includes:
- Shared Data—Providers lack concrete information on what resources are out there and how it all fits together (city & county)
- Program Quality and Access—The quality of early childhood education and access to programs are two potential study areas.
- Coordination of Services— Different regulation systems and sources of funding can complicate the coordination of educational services.
- Lack of Resources—Early childhood education remains underfunded
- Child Population & Poverty Numbers—To assess this issue properly, the OCL needs to determine the number and percentage of children in Onondaga County that receive early childhood education. Plus, if poverty is a risk factor, how many children are poor and/or live in poor neighborhoods?
- School Readiness—Overall, how many children in Onondaga County are adequately prepared for kindergarten upon enrollment? What happens to a child who is in kindergarten, but he or she is "not ready"?
- Model Programs—What are the model programs in other communities and how/why are they successful?
- Definition of School Readiness—How should pre-k providers measure school readiness? What is a common tool that could be developed and implemented?

- Parenting Skills—How can parents be educated on how to help their children prepare for and be successful in school?
- Parent Profile—
- Prenatal Parenting Support—Are pregnant women adequately supported and do they have access to the resources and tools they need for their as well as their child's healthy development?
- Health Effect on Outcomes—
- Refugees' Needs—Does Syracuse's refugee population have any specific early childhood education needs?
- Credentialing–What is the credentialing process for early childhood education providers?
- Successful Practices—Are there key practices and programs that all early childhood education providers should be using to ensure they are preparing children for kindergarten? How can they evaluate their services?
- Equal Opportunity for Children with Mental Health Needs—Are children with mental health needs receiving adequate care and support? Do they fall through the cracks?
- Counter Arguments—What are the arguments against early childhood education and how can this study prove them false?
- Diversity of Regulations—How many different regulations are there (affecting early childhood education programs) and how can providers better coordinate care & services?
- Resources—How can we, as a community, augment our early childhood education programming and funding? And/or make the most of what we currently have?
- Map—Can we create a visual map of the current early childhood education landscape in Onondaga County and the existing partnerships/coalitions?
- Federal/State Efforts—How can we encourage state and federal governments to mandate pre-k education and increase funding?

Next Study Committee Meeting - TBA