II. Executive Summary

The field of school-age care has evolved over time in order to meet the diverse needs of school-age youth and their families. A major challenge facing the Georgia school-age care field is the lack of information on the number and characteristics of school-age programs. This study was designed to better understand the characteristics of school-age care programs in the larger metro Atlanta area and the training needs of program staff.

Study Method. Databases were obtained from five major sources in order to develop a comprehensive list of all school-age care programs in the metro Atlanta area that provide more intensive programming. To be included in the study programs had to meet the following criteria: 1) provide care to youth in Kindergarten through 12th grade, 2) operate at least two hours per day, and 3) operate for at least three days each week.

A program survey and a staff training survey were mailed to 1,554 programs in March and April of 2001. After removing duplicates and surveys returned as non-deliverable, the final database included 1,488 programs. A total of 297 mail surveys were returned for a response rate of 20%. Of these, 273 met the above criteria for inclusion in the study. Accompanying training surveys were received from 201 program administrators. Selected information was received through a follow-up phone survey from an additional 125 programs that did not return the mail surveys to determine the extent to which non-responding programs were similar to or different from the programs that returned the mail survey.

As reported in the section summaries of this report, most of our results replicate the findings from previous research (see Appendix E). Thus, the issues facing SAC programs in the metro Atlanta area appear to be similar to those facing the nation as a whole.

The Supply of and Demand for SAC. Based on the program survey results, we estimate that the 13 county metro Atlanta area includes approximately 1,350 SAC programs providing services at least six hours per week. The number of programs varies considerably across counties from a low of 7 programs in Butts County to a high of 412 in Fulton County. Two-thirds of the programs are located in only three counties (Fulton, DeKalb and Cobb). The density of school-age care programs is highest along and to the south of Interstate 20 extending from Interstate 285 West to Interstate 285 East. This area also contains large numbers of low-income families and African-American youth.

Using capacity data, we estimate that there are approximately 150,000 SAC slots for elementary-age youth in the 13 county data, but only 17,000 middle school and 6,000 high school slots. Based on national figures for the percent of families that typically use facility-based SAC arrangements, the minimum demand for SAC for elementary-age youth is estimated to be between 41,500 – 115,200 slots. The estimated current enrollment of 99,000 elementary-age youth is closer to the upper end of this range.

While these calculations indicate that, overall, SAC supply may be adequate to meet demand in the 13 county metro Atlanta, there was also evidence that demand may exceed supply in some geographical areas, such as Fayette County. Moreover, some programs may have open slots because they do not meet the needs of working families or because they may not have a sufficient funding base to provide a high quality program.

Program Characteristics. Almost two-thirds of the SAC programs described in this study had been established in the last twenty years. The most common setting for SAC programs was a privately owned child care center that also provided care for preschool children. One-fourth of SAC programs were in public schools. About half of the SAC programs were in shared space. Slightly over half of the programs were not-for-profit.

While two-thirds of the SAC programs were state or federally licensed or regulated, only about 20% of programs were nationally accredited, which requires meeting a higher level of program quality. Very few SAC programs (6%) appeared to be totally without some form of monitoring.

Almost all SAC programs operated Monday through Friday. About two-thirds of the programs operated year round and there were very few programs that offered programming only in the summer. Almost all programs operated after school, half offered before-school care and very few operated in the evening or at night. Only about half of the programs offered care on holidays and school breaks. The relatively large number of programs with restricted schedules may represent an impediment for some working parents.

While transportation to and from school was fairly common, less than ten percent of programs offered transportation to and from home, which may serve as another impediment to parents being able to access programs of their choice. While most programs offered meals and snacks during times they were open, 40% did not access USDA food programs.

Almost all of the intensive SAC programs responding to the survey served elementary-age youth. Only one in five enrolled middle school youth and even fewer, 6%, enrolled youth in high school. About three-fourths of the SAC

programs also served preschoolers. Over half of the elementary-age youth were African American and over one-third were European American. Very few (3%) Hispanic youth were enrolled. Almost two-thirds of the programs enrolled at least some low-income youth and slightly over half enrolled some youth with disabilities.

The total average capacity of SAC programs serving elementary-age youth was 111, although only an average of 73 youth were enrolled in the programs. Average enrollment of middle and high school youth was even lower.

There was great variability in program size for SAC programs serving elementary-age youth. Most SAC programs served 100 youth or less. About one program director in ten, however, reported maximum capacities of 300 students or above. Very large SAC programs were usually found in public schools, although they accounted for only about one in three school-based programs. The very large school-based programs differed from the majority of school-based programs in that they primarily offered a drop-in program, rather than enrolling youth for specific days.

Only one in four SAC programs for elementary-age youth was filled to capacity. Over half of the programs were at 80% of capacity or less. Half of the directors in programs that were at maximum capacity or had waiting lists indicated that they may be able to expand the program, although only 17% definitely felt they had sufficient space to expand. Directors of programs with more openings reported greater problems recruiting youth. In turn, problems recruiting youth were associated with: 1) being open less often; 2) offering fewer transportation services; 3) funding problems, and 4) quality indicators such as staff turnover, lack of adequate materials and equipment, and lower family involvement.

Almost all directors reported meeting the needs of working parents as a primary focus of their program, with education being a strong secondary focus and recreation being a secondary focus in only about one-third of the programs. The very low emphasis on prevention/intervention across the programs was especially surprising given the high incidence of youth with multiple risk factors in the metro Atlanta area.

Most programs offered activities to promote the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development of youth and, to a somewhat lesser extent, to provide enrichment and recreation activities. Programs also had a relatively strong emphasis on tutoring/homework assistance. Life skills education, prevention activities, family support/involvement and a focus on specific academic subjects such as math, science and social studies, were much less common. Programming on leadership development, community involvement and careers were seldom emphasized in programs serving elementary and middle school

youth although over two-thirds of the few programs serving high school youth did offer these activities. Use of outside organizations to provide programming in SAC settings was common.

Problems of SAC Programs. The most challenging problems facing SAC programs related to staffing issues. Attracting qualified staff, staff turnover, and finding substitutes were the problems mentioned most often by directors, along with obtaining funding for the program. Problems with behavior management of youth, inadequate space, getting parents/ families involved in the program and training staff were also commonly reported. When asked to indicate the number one challenge they faced, the most prevalent responses were recruiting staff (24%), inadequate space (11%), and obtaining adequate funding for the program (10%).

Training Needs. The directors/administrators responding to this survey were a diverse group demographically and with regards to training preferences. Ninety percent of the directors were female. About half of the directors were non-Hispanic European Americans and over one-third were African-American. The majority of directors (60%) worked in a city with a population over 50,000, had five or fewer years of experience in their current position (55%) and administered programs which also included preschool children (67%). Half of the directors had a four-year degree or higher.

Although a large percentage of directors indicated general interest in most training topics, typically one-fourth or fewer directors included any given topic among their top three choices for training. Training on staffing issues, guidance/behavior management, and curriculum/activity planning were the topics of greatest interest to directors. However, only 32-42% of administrators / directors included any of these topics among their top three training choices. A number of important SAC training topics, such as learning about specific cultures, equal access and equity issues, environmental education and advocating for SAC, were of little interest to directors.

There also was great variability across directors in their preferred training methods, although half-day trainings on Saturday mornings appeared to be preferred by the majority of providers. In addition, there was substantial interest in a variety of individual learning methods. Four out of every five directors were interested in video-based training options and about half of the directors showed interest in a variety of other self-study methods. Almost half of the directors were willing to pay $5 to $10 per hour for training.

There was no one training problem that affected the ability of most directors to attend training. About one-fourth of the directors experienced no problems with training. The most prevalent problems, listed among the top three challenges by

20-33% of directors, were training access challenges: training being offered at bad times or bad locations, not knowing what training is being offered, lack of substitutes, and the high cost of training.

Not-for-Profit and For-Profit Programs. Important differences between not-for-profit and for-profit programs were evident in this study. Almost 90% of for-profit programs were privately owned and were more likely than not-for-profits to be female and minority-owned. Not-for-profit programs were more diverse in their sponsorship than were for-profit programs. About half were operated by public schools and one-fourth were operated by youth and faith-based organizations.

Not-for-profit programs were less likely than for-profit programs to be state regulated but were more likely to follow the program standards of their organization and to be accredited.   They were also more likely to view prevention/intervention as a major focus of their program, although only a small number of not-for-profit programs overall (12%) focused on this area.

Not-for-profit programs were much less likely to serve preschool children and had much larger SAC capacities and enrollments compared to for-profit programs. In contrast, the racial-ethnic characteristics of the enrolled youth were similar between not-for-profit and for-profit programs and they were equally likely to enroll low-income youth and youth with disabilities.   Not-for profit programs offered somewhat fewer services than for-profits and were less likely to offer programming year-round and on holidays and breaks.   Not-for-profits also operated for fewer hours than for-profit programs during the summer.

While both types of programs reported similar challenges, there were some systematic differences between not-for-profit and for-profit programs. Staffing problems and the high cost of the program to families were viewed as more of a challenge by administrators in for-profit programs while problems with space, transportation and meals/snacks were viewed as more challenging for administrators in not-for-profit programs.

There also were differences between not-for-profit and for-profit programs in terms of administrator training preferences.   Administrators in not-for-profit programs were more likely than those in for-profit programs to prefer training on weekdays, to report lack of substitutes as one of their top three training problems, and to be able to pay nothing or only $5 per hour for training.   In contrast, for-profit administrators were more likely than not-for-profit administrators to prefer training on weekends and about half could pay $7.50 - $10 per hour for training. For-profit directors also were more likely to prefer a 10-hour training series and learn-at-home methods. It is possible that because most for-profit programs include preschool children and offer morning programs, administrators of these programs may need to work full-time during the day. This

would make it more difficult for them to attend group training on weekdays and to have time to engage in independent study at their work site.

Although it will be necessary to replicate these results with a larger sample before any firm conclusions can be drawn, the results of this study provide beginning evidence that auspice may be an important variable to consider in providing assistance to SAC programs and providers. Different supports and different approaches to training may be required to meet the unique needs of both not-for-profit and for-profit programs.

Summary and Recommendations. Currently there are in excess of 1,350 intensive SAC programs in metro Atlanta that are serving about 100,000 elementary, middle school and high school youth. SAC programs are diverse, with a diverse set of needs. As the quality of early childhood care and education improves through initiative such as the Georgia Early Learning Initiative (GELI), it will be critical that children from these programs be able to enroll in equally high-quality SAC programs. The following three actions are important first steps to ensuring a high quality SAC system in the metro Atlanta area.

- More precise tracking and analysis of SAC capacity, enrollment and wait list information by county and community is needed to better understand the extent to which supply meets the demand within specific geographical areas. There is some evidence from this study that demand may exceed supply in certain geographical areas. The response rate to this survey was insufficient, however, to clearly identify areas with substantial need and areas where there may be an over-abundance of SAC slots. This information is needed by potential SAC funders to help ensure that new SAC programs are located in areas with demonstrated need.

- Greater input from parents and youth is required to understand the extent to which SAC programs are meeting their needs. Of particular concern was the finding that programs that offered more restricted hours and fewer services were also more likely to be under-enrolled. For the SAC system to work effectively, the characteristics of the programs offered must meet the needs of the families and youth who use them.

- Attracting and retaining qualified staff is the number one problem facing SAC programs in the metro Atlanta area. Greater attention must be given to meeting the pre-service and in-service training needs of SAC staff and providing tiered reimbursement incentives tied to higher levels of education and training. Greater dependence on individual training options, such as Internet- and video-based training and correspondence

courses, may be needed to increase the availability and accessibility of SAC training, especially in areas with fewer training options.

Like early care and education, the availability of quality SAC is critical to the Georgia economy and the well-being of Georgia families. Families that can easily access care that meets their needs are more likely to be available for employment and to be productive at work. School-age youth who are in stimulating and caring environments when out of school and away from their parents are more likely to succeed academically and gain the life skills needed to become caring, productive, and involved members of our society. Ensuring a strong SAC system makes sense—for youth, their families and the Georgia communities in which they live.