EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Oklahoma School Readiness Reach-by-Risk Report 2014 is to provide policy makers and other early childhood stakeholders with current data on factors that place children at risk of being unprepared for school and on the reach of services and programs that promote school readiness for each of the state's 77 counties.

By analyzing the prevalence of certain sociodemographic indicators of school readiness, this report highlights counties where children are at high risk for starting kindergarten unprepared to learn. This issue is critical for the state and the nation as children who begin school already behind are likely to remain behind throughout their academic life, severely limiting their individual potential and perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Understanding risk alone, however, is insufficient for determining where the need is greatest. Resources can be more efficiently distributed if risk is understood in relation to the reach of early education and child care services. To achieve this goal, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS) presents this report in an effort to identify gaps between the risk of starting school un-ready to learn and the reach of programs that prepare children for school. With this publication, Oklahoma joins other states in monitoring indicators of school readiness risk and reach and promoting informed policy and funding decisions related to quality early childhood education and child care.

This report is divided into two main sections, Risk and Reach. The Risk section consists of an analysis of 10 socioeconomic and demographic indicators found by empirical research to increase a child's risk of being unprepared for school. These factors are assessed for each of the state's 77 counties, resulting in a county-level risk value and categorization into one of four risk categories ranging from High to Low Risk. The Reach section assesses the county-level service density of six primarily publicly funded early childhood education and four home visitation programs designed to increase the cognitive and social-emotional development of young children, in addition to several aspects of child care services, such as provider quality ratings and enrollment of children with child care subsidies in quality facilities.

METHODOLOGY

The indicators highlighted in this report have been identified in the literature as factors that place children at risk of starting kindergarten already behind, are available by the county level, and are updated annually, which allows for continued monitoring. For each indicator, data at the state and county levels were collected from multiple secondary sources and reported as proportions of relevant populations (e.g., percent of live births to mothers with low levels of education).

Data were statistically analyzed using multivariate techniques to create components, or "sets" of factors that most closely correlated with each other and that significantly explained school readiness, with third-grade reading proficiency used as a proxy of readiness. Three sets emerged from the analysis as significantly associated with school readiness: Hispanic background, family structure and economic distress, and children in child welfare. Further analysis was conducted to assign overall risk scores to each county, group counties into quartiles based on these overall scores, and classify groups according to categories of High, High-Medium, Medium-Low, and Low Risk for poor school readiness. It is important to note that risk is based on a comparison of Oklahoma counties relative to each other, which excludes direct comparisons to other states or the nation.

RISK

Reach was assessed by requesting data for early education programs, such as Head Start (HS), Early Head Start (EHS) and the state's universal pre-kindergarten program; early childhood home visitation programs, such as SoonerStart, the state's IDEA Part C – Early Intervention program; and child care services. Agencies contacted for data include the Oklahoma Departments of Human Services, Health and Education, and the Oklahoma Association of Community Action Agencies and American Indian tribal governments responsible for HS and EHS programs. For all but five programs, reach ratios were calculated for each county and summarized into an index using the same methodology applied for risk, and counties were classified as High, High-Medium, Medium-Low and Low Reach on individual programs and in three indexes: Overall Reach, Education Reach and Child Care Reach. Reach data are compared to overall risk for poor school readiness for each county, which highlights counties with the greatest need for early childhood education and child care services relative to risk.

FINDINGS

RISK

An average score in the High Risk category means counties have, overall, among the highest rates of socioeconomic and demographic factors known to impede school readiness. This suggests that children in these counties are more likely to be unprepared to learn when they start kindergarten and to have poor educational outcomes.

HIGH RISK: Approximately 40,896 children under age 6, or 13% of the state's population of children in this age group, reside in 19 counties with the greatest concentration of risk factors. The number of factors for which counties in this group ranked as High Risk range from three to seven, with a mean of five High Risk factors.

HIGH-MEDIUM RISK: At somewhat less risk, but still of concern, are the 103,669 children (33%) who live in the 19 counties classified as High-Medium Risk. The number of factors for which counties in this group ranked as High Risk range from one to five, with a mean of three High Risk factors.

MEDIUM-LOW RISK: An estimated 94,555 children under age 6 (30%) reside in 18 counties with an even lower prevalence of risk factors, but may have moderate rates for a few factors. The number of factors for which counties in this group ranked as High Risk range from zero to three, with a mean of one High Risk factor.

LOW RISK: Twenty-one counties have the lowest level of overall risk, with 77,380 children (24%) residing in these counties. The number of factors for which counties in this group ranked as High Risk range from zero to two, with a mean of less than one High Risk factor.

OVERALL: In total, 144,565 children under age 6 live in counties classified as High Risk or High-Medium Risk for poor school readiness. This represents an estimated 46% of all children under age 6 in Oklahoma.

SCHOOL READINESS RISK FACTORS: VARIABLE SETS

HISPANIC BACKGROUND
Four risk indicators are associated with being Hispanic and having limited English skills and include: percent of children under age 5 who are Hispanic/Latino, percent of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students who are English-language learners, percent of infants born to mothers who lack a high school diploma, and percent of children under age 6 who receive Migrant Education Program services. Of Oklahoma counties, 34 (44%) were classified as High Risk on at least one indicator, with two counties scoring High Risk on all four indicators.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC DISTRESS
Four risk indicators are associated with poverty and family structure and include: percent of children under age 6 living under 100% of the federal poverty level, percent of children under age 6 living in households headed by single parents, percent of infants born to mothers between the ages of 10 and 19, and percent of children under age 5 who are American Indian/Alaskan Native. Of Oklahoma counties, 40 (52%) were classified as High Risk on at least one indicator, with five counties scoring High Risk on all four indicators.

CHILDREN IN CHILD WELFARE

Two risk indicators are associated with child welfare and include: percent of children under age 6 who have experienced abuse and neglect, and percent of children under age 6 in DHS custody. Of Oklahoma counties, 24 (31%) were classified as High Risk on at least one indicator, with 14 counties scoring High Risk on both indicators.

REACH

An average score in the High Reach category means counties have high rates of reach for particular programs and services or in combination. A positive correlation was found between overall reach and risk, meaning that as risk increases, so does reach. The same results were obtained for the education Reach Index, but not for the child care Reach Index, for which High Risk counties are not served at a significantly higher rate than lower risk counties. A handful of counties at greatest risk are in the lowest reach group.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The greatest reach for early childhood education programs is among High Risk counties that serve a considerably greater proportion of children in HS, EHS and publicly funded pre-kindergarten than all other risk groups. In addition, children in High Risk counties have the highest rate of full-day pre-kindergarten attendance. The High-Medium Risk group serves a similar rate of children in pre-kindergarten and HS as lower risk counties, and, with the fewest number of counties with EHS, the lowest rate of children in this program.

CHILD CARE

The High Risk group ranks at the bottom of several child care indicators. Although these counties have the highest rate of child care centers of all licensed providers, they have the lowest rate of quality providers with Two and Three Star ratings and the lowest overall and quality capacity rates for serving children under age 6 with working parents. Further, High Risk counties have one of the lowest rates of child care providers that contract with DHS to accept child care subsidy payments. High Risk counties have the lowest rate of subsidy enrollment of total contractor capacity and the lowest rate of subsidy enrollment at Two and Three Star providers.

HOME VISITATION

Home visitation reach could only be determined for Oklahoma Parents as Teachers (OPAT), which serves 27 counties. The High Risk group has the fewest counties (four) and the lowest rate of children served.

CONCLUSION

As the overall risk classification is a summary measure, it does not capture the complexity of school readiness risk for each county. To fully understand issues facing each county, a summary of risk classifications is provided in the appendix. While data on the reach of early childhood programs allows for a comparison of risk and service levels for each county, it is important to note that reach data are limited by the potential inclusion of duplicated numbers of children and by including only the largest programs that benefit young children.

This report relies on those indicators described in the literature and evidenced in the analysis as having a significant effect on school readiness, but they are by no means exhaustive. Data presented in this document provide a reliable estimate of school readiness risk and reach that can be used to inform policy decisions and allocation of critical but limited resources. It also serves as a baseline for continued monitoring of the state of school readiness in Oklahoma. In the future, more variables that explain school readiness will be included in the analysis as data become available at the county level.

REACH