



# Improving the State of Early Learning

---

## What is Tri-County Smart Start Kansas?

Tri-County Smart Start is working to ensure that children in Johnson, Leavenworth and Wyandotte Counties enter kindergarten ready for educational success by improving the quality of the education they receive from birth to age five. The initiative is led by United Way of Wyandotte County, with support from United Way of Greater Kansas City and United Way of Leavenworth County.

Tri-County Smart Start provides financial assistance, training and targeted professional development to early childhood programs that commit to achieving specific quality standards. The initiative began in 2001 with 17 programs. In 2006, Tri-County Smart Start worked with 20 early childhood programs, serving over 1,300 children in the tri-county area. In 2008, Tri-County Smart Start added 20 early childhood programs to the initiative, both centers and family child care homes, totaling 39 programs serving over 2900 children.

### The initiative has the following goals:

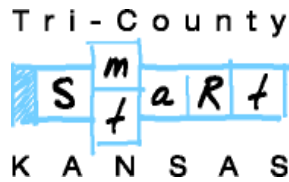
- 1** Reduce the high teacher turnover rates that plague many early learning programs and affect the consistency and quality of the educational experience for children;
- 2** Increase the number of teachers with two and four-year college degrees in early childhood education; and
- 3** Expand the number of quality early childhood programs in Johnson, Leavenworth, and Wyandotte Counties, through the achievement of state recognized quality standards.

Tri-County Smart Start encourages teachers to stay in the profession by providing funds to supplement their wages and benefits, and support their higher education. The program also offers mini-grants to improve the quality of the environment based on the needs of the program. This may include paying for classroom furnishings, books, play materials, and facility improvements. Participating programs also receive coaching and technical assistance to help them reach national quality standards.

Participating programs are evaluated through The Kansas Quality Rating System (KQRS), an evaluation system that assesses programs in five areas and assigns a star rating based on the results. Following assessment, programs are assigned 1 to 5 stars, with 5 being the highest rating possible. KQRS also provides a detailed report to guide improvement efforts.

For more information on Tri-County Smart Start, call Director Jennifer McDonald Traffis at the United Way of Wyandotte County, (913) 371-3674.

---



# Improving the State of Early Learning

---

## What are the results so far?

Tri-County Smart Start began working with 17 early childhood programs in Johnson, Leavenworth and Wyandotte Counties in 2001. At the time, data on teacher turnover across the metropolitan area showed average annual turnover for early childhood teachers at 40 percent (Mid-America Regional Council, MARC). For some programs, the turnover rate was even higher.

For many adults, early childhood education is not an attractive long-term profession because of the low wages, working conditions and scarce benefits. Early childhood workers earn an average of \$8.50 per hour to work with children for 50 or more hours per week.

Tri-County Smart Start launched its program with a focus on stabilizing the early childhood workforce by providing wage supplements and financial incentives to teachers to remain in their jobs and pursue higher education and college degrees in their field. In addition, prior to 2008, TCSS participated in the Quality Rating System (QRS), a model being used across Greater Kansas City and the state of Kansas to evaluate centers and help them make improvements that lead to accreditation. The results from these efforts are notable:

### 1 Teacher turnover has decreased significantly

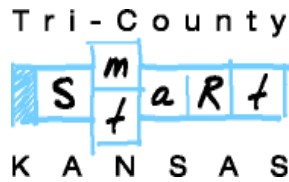
- For teachers working in TCSS programs and receiving wage supplements, turnover decreased from 22 percent in 2002 to 13.9 percent in 2007, and was at 12 percent at the mid-year point in 2008.

### 2 More early childhood teachers have degrees or certification in their field

- In 2003, 131 teachers in Tri-County Smart Start programs receiving wage compensation had earned a Child Development Associate (CDA), associate's degree, a bachelor's degree or master's degree in early childhood education. In 2005, the number of teachers with certification or degrees in their field had grown to 162; at mid-year 2006, the number reached 165.
- In 2008, of the 150 teachers and directors currently receiving Smart Start wage supplementation, 150 (100%) currently hold a CDA, AS, AAS, BA/BS or MA/MS/MsED. This information includes teachers and directors in 15 renewing Smart Start centers. The breakdown is as follows:

For more information on Tri-County Smart Start, call Director Jennifer McDonald Traffis at the United Way of Wyandotte County, (913) 371-3674.

---



# Improving the State of Early Learning

---

## **3** More early childhood programs have achieved accreditation and have a rating of 3 or more stars in KQRS

- In 2002, eight of 17 Tri-County Smart Start-supported programs had achieved accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the nationally recognized accrediting organization.
- As of mid-year 2007, 13 of 20 programs had achieved NAEYC accreditation and 7 are actively working toward the goal.
- In 2008 all TCSS program participating in KQRS had achieved a 3 star or higher .



# Improving the State of Early Learning

---

## Who leads the program?

The United Way of Wyandotte County administers and directs the Tri-County Smart Start initiative with input and oversight of a 24-member Tri-County Smart Start Advisory Board. The Advisory Board includes representatives from early education, K-12 education, family and community services, and business and government leaders from the three counties involved.

Tri-County Smart Start is primarily funded through a grant from the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust. Tri-County Smart Start is one of 17 programs covering 47 counties being funded by the Children's Cabinet. While each program takes a different approach to improving early learning and health services, all of the funded programs are working to ensure Kansas children enter school healthy and prepared to succeed.

Beyond the Advisory Board, Tri-County Smart Start has established partnerships with numerous education, advocacy and human service organizations, including Kansas Social and Rehabilitation Services, Head Start, the Johnson County Library, Kansas Parents as Teachers, The Family Conservancy, Mid-America Regional Council (MARC), the public health departments and other organizations that serve children and families.

## Tri-County Smart Start Staff

### **Wendell E. Maddox, Jr. – President and CEO of the United Way of Wyandotte County.**

Wendell joined the United Way as Director of Agency Relations/Allocations in 2000. He previously worked in the non-profit sector as Executive Director of Turner House, a social service organization, and as Midwest Regional Director for the Humane Society of the United States.

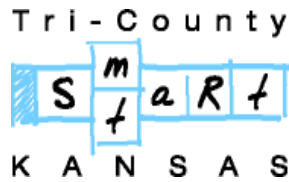
### **Jennifer R. McDonald Traffis – Director of Tri-County Smart Start.**

Jennifer began her career in Early Childhood Education as a teacher at the UMKC Berkley Child and Family Development Center, and continued at UMKC as the initial Site Manager of Jumpstart, an AmeriCorps program that pairs college students with preschoolers to prepare children for school success. McDonald also held the position of Central Region Program Director for the national non-profit organization Jumpstart for Young Children, Inc.

*See next page for Advisory Board.*

For more information on Tri-County Smart Start, call Director Jennifer McDonald Traffis at the United Way of Wyandotte County, (913) 371-3674.

---



# Improving the State of Early Learning

---

## Tri-County Smart Start Kansas 2006 Leadership Board

**Joe Daniels, Board Chair**

Community Volunteer  
(Former) County Commissioner  
Leavenworth, KS  
*Leavenworth County*

**Lynnette Booker**

Kansas Department of Social &  
Rehabilitation Services  
Program Consultant  
*Wyandotte County*

**Bobbie Bower**

Parents as Teachers  
USD 453  
Program Coordinator  
*Leavenworth County*

**Aaron Bowman**

Metcalf Bank  
SVP & CFO  
*Johnson County*

**James M. Caccamo, Ph.D.**

Mid-America Regional Council  
Metropolitan Council on Early Learning  
Director of Early Learning  
and Head Start

**Dolores Furtado, Ph.D.**

Johnson County Board of County  
Commissioners  
County Commissioner  
*Johnson County*

**Clyde Graeber**

County Commissioner  
*Leavenworth County*

**Kris Hearn**

Kansas City Kansas  
Community College  
Coordinator/Professor - Early  
Childhood Education  
*Wyandotte County*

**Jody Kaaz**

Kaaz – Lexeco Construction  
Companies, Inc.  
Vice-President  
*Leavenworth County*

**Wendell Maddox**

United Way of Wyandotte County  
President/CEO

**Kyle Matchell – ex-officio**

Mid-America Regional Council  
Metropolitan Council on  
Early Learning  
Early Learning Manager

**Chiquita Miller**

K-State Research Extension of  
Wyandotte County  
Family and Consumer Science Agent  
*Wyandotte County*

**Marcia Nicely**

Community Volunteer  
*Leavenworth County*

**Dean Olson**

The Family Conservancy  
Vice-President of Children's Services  
*Wyandotte County*

**John Pettey**

Board of Public Utilities  
Board Member  
*Wyandotte County*

**Carol Smith**

United Community Services  
Associate Director  
*Johnson County*

**Cindy Trupka**

Community Volunteer  
Francis Child Development Institute  
Early Childhood Resource Specialist  
*Wyandotte County*

**Eric Tyler**

Board of Public Utilities  
Systems Operator  
Employee Council  
*Wyandotte County*

---

For more information on Tri-County Smart Start, call Director Jennifer McDonald Traffis at the United Way of Wyandotte County, (913) 371-3674.



# Improving the State of Early Learning

## Why focus on early learning?

**The research is clear: Children begin learning from the moment of birth.** While the human brain grows and develops throughout life, 90 percent of brain development takes place in the first three years. In fact, by the time children reach age three, their brains are twice as active as those of adults.

## How do they learn?

Children learn about the world and how it works from their early experiences and the interactions they have with their parents and other primary caregivers in the first years of life. The young child's capacity to learn, how they communicate, how they interact with others, and how they respond to new experiences are influenced by the love, care, and attention they receive. These early experiences not only affect brain growth and development, but influence how children learn, think and behave as adults.

## How does this relate to early childhood education?

Quite simply, the early years are prime time for learning, so it is critical that parents choose carefully when selecting an early learning environment for their children.

## What is early learning?

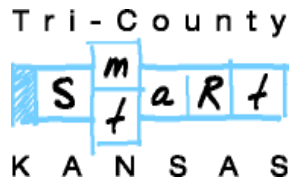
For young children social and emotional development, learning how to interact with others, developing problem-solving skills, and understanding and using words to communicate are critical skills that set the stage for success in kindergarten and life long learning.

## What does a quality early learning environment look like?

High-quality early learning environments offer:

- Respectful, nurturing relationships with adults;
- Positive social interactions with caregivers and other children;
- Exposure to words and language through talk, books, songs, rhymes and games;
- Multiple opportunities for expression;
- Physical activity and safe places in which to play and explore;

For more information on Tri-County Smart Start, call Director Jennifer McDonald Traffis at the United Way of Wyandotte County, (913) 371-3674.



# Improving the State of Early Learning

---

High-quality early learning environments have educated and well-paid teachers and low turnover. Skilled early learning teachers understand child development and use curricula that are appropriate for children's ages and stages of development. They build respectful, caring relationships with children, and involve families in the learning process.

## What's the value of a quality early learning environment to the community?

A number of national studies have demonstrated the return on investment in early education. Children who experience quality early education are more likely to show greater language ability and higher scores on math and reading tests, and have fewer behavior problems. Furthermore, they are more likely to graduate from high school, hold a job, own a home and commit fewer crimes (Sources: *High Scope Perry Preschool Study*, Rand Corporation).

## How is the program evaluated?

Tri-County Smart Start evaluates the quality of early childhood programs using the Kansas Quality Rating System (KQRS). A Quality Rating System is a measurement tool which has been adopted by a number of communities and states that provides early childhood programs with the information and feedback they need to improve their programs. Nearly 120 early childhood programs in the Greater Kansas City area are currently using QRS to guide improvement of their programs.

### How does KQRS work?

KQRS assesses programs in five areas:

- 1 Learning environments
- 2 Family partnership
- 3 Training and education
- 4 Adult-to-child ratios
- 5 Program Accreditation

Points are awarded in each area and an overall quality rating is calculated. Early childhood programs receive a Quality Performance Profile, a report that summarizes strengths and areas for improvement. Based on their assessment results, programs also receive a star rating of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest rating. Programs that receive a star rating of 4 are encouraged to begin the accreditation self-study process through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Every program that participates in Tri-County Smart Start receives a KQRS assessment and is assigned a KQRS coach. Coaches work directly with center directors and staff to develop an action plan for making improvements. Along with coaching, centers also are eligible to apply to Tri-County Smart Start for mini-grants to help with specific needs, such as playground equipment, facilities improvements, and purchasing toys and classroom materials.



# Improving the State of Early Learning

---

## How you can get involved

Tri-County Smart Start is continually seeking resources and support from the communities in which it works. There are several ways that your organization can join our efforts to help early childhood programs provide healthy, caring learning environments for children.

- Provide financial support.** Your financial support to the United Way of Wyandotte County helps fund Tri-County Smart Start. Financial resources provide training for teachers and staff, help teachers pursue college degrees and help with other quality improvements.
- Make an in-kind contribution.** A number of businesses have provided equipment, toys or furnishings. Some companies have offered assistance with playground and building improvements.
- Adopt a program.** Call Tri-County Smart Start to find out about “adopting” a program. This is an opportunity to volunteer, help with a school improvement project, plan a book drive, or support a family fun activity for a center.
- Be an advocate for quality early learning.** Talk with your elected officials about the value of early learning programs. Let them know that early learning programs have economic benefits that last for years. Encourage local and state government leaders to fund initiatives that support early learning.
- Become a partner.** Tri-County Smart Start looks to a variety of community organizations to provide input, share their programs and services with center staff and families, and bring fresh ideas and resources that benefit children.

For more information on Tri-County Smart Start, call Director Jennifer McDonald Traffis at the United Way of Wyandotte County, (913) 371-3674.

---