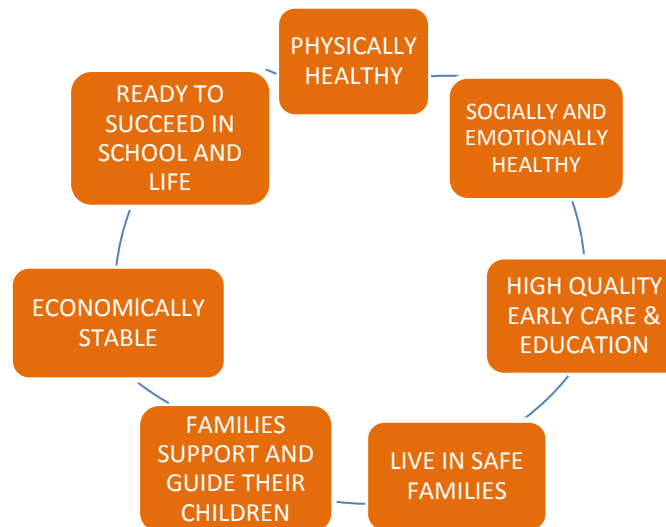


PURPOSE

One of the highly recommended advocacy activities for this year is an Early Childhood Bus Tour. Many of our elected officials have suggested that we share personal stories about the impact of early childhood programs with them. However, bringing them into direct contact with the faces and locations of programs connected with the infrastructure development work of the local Great Start Collaborative can be even more impactful. And a bus tour of the high quality programs along with the information about the local GSC work that form the key elements of your local Great Start system is a great way to do just that!

A bus tour gives policymakers the opportunity to connect the decisions that they make to the actual families in their community, and can create a lasting impression for the participants. In addition, a tour of the programs and conditions of your county can be incredibly powerful to Great Start Parent Coalition (GSPC) and Great Start Collaborative (GSC) members who are advocating for these programs and perhaps have never seen them and/or participated in them personally.

At the conclusion of the tour, everyone who participated should leave with a solid understanding of the importance of a comprehensive early childhood system, where all of the following results³ are being addressed for every child:



As it states in the state White Paper, “to grow and thrive in school and beyond, children need their basic needs met, including adequate housing, nutrition, health care and early learning opportunities. Because children have multiple needs, communities must work to provide services that are seamless for children and families, not convenient for bureaucracies. The focus must be on the whole child: sick, hungry and homeless children cannot learn.

Michigan’s leaders must embrace reforms that help move the state from an array of disconnected programs to an accountable early childhood system. What exists today is a patchwork of more than 85 publically-funded early childhood services and programs that are available to a limited number of families based on varying and sometimes confusing eligibility requirements. The result: too many children fall through the cracks.

MAKING THE COMMUNITY PLAN

Planning a bus tour does not need to be an overwhelming task that creates a large amount of work. The main goal is for elected officials, GSC and GSPC members to see programs in action and to impress upon them the importance of an early childhood system. So, schedule the visits for a typical day or during an activity that would already be planned. While we are calling this a “bus tour” it is not necessary to use an actual bus. Consider the number of people that will realistically participate, the budget that you have to work with and the financial perception that you want to convey to your elected officials. Based upon these elements, decide whether you need a large van, a charter bus or a school bus for this event.

As your Bus Tour Planning Team (see appendix A) thinks about what programs to include in an early childhood bus tour, reflect on the findings of your Strategic Review. In the Strategic Review your community looked at data on the status of young children and reached out to the community to learn more about how well programs and services were working for families of young children. Your GSC learned about programs that are making a difference for young children and those programs are likely a good place to start in terms of identifying places you want to “show off” to policy-makers. This is your chance to educate policy-makers about what it takes to get children ready for school, so it will be important to show more than one kind of program. For example, preschool alone, no matter how effective the program is, will not get every child ready for school. In fact, many children and families need a variety of supports to assure school success.

You want policy makers to understand this fact by showing them for example, a health clinic that is doing a great job of connecting families with community resources or a play group for 0-3 in the local library that not only promotes early literacy but connects parents to each other for support. No matter which programs are ultimately selected remember to show a variety of examples of high quality, evidence-based programs and services from each of the five component areas¹. Use this bus tour to both SHOW and EXPLAIN how the GSC is working to build an interconnected and intertwined **system** of public and private programs, services and supports that can work together in a community to accomplish better results for young children and families. If your state legislator’s district involves other GSC’s be sure to connect with the GSC Director or GSPC Parent Liaison and coordinate your efforts.

The bus tour provides a chance to highlight the early childhood programs that demonstrate the agreements and collaboration that have been fostered through the GSC. The bus tour provides an opportunity to share information that has been learned through parent members of the GSC or the GSPC.

Some examples might include:

Many pediatricians (who work in the private sector) do not know about services for children in the public sector, and so they do not refer children and families to programs that exist that could provide needed intervention or therapy.

Understanding the value of prenatal care and proper nutrition during pregnancy is lost on a large proportion of pregnant women in our state. There are programs like Nurse Family Partnership in some communities, but there are long waiting lists of women who qualify for these services, but not enough staffing or funding.

Too many children are living in homes with dangerous levels of lead, and parents are not aware of the brain damage that can result from these conditions and they don't know where they can go to have their children and home tested.

Childcare centers range greatly in their approach to educating children and the quality of the program they offer. Quite often, caregivers (especially in-home providers) notice developmental delays but do not know how to help or where to refer the families.

As the Team is making the decisions about the programs to visit, it is important to make sure that everyone understands that this is not a tour to advocate for specific programs, but rather a tour to impress upon our legislators that investing in young children is an issue that needs to be a priority and an illustration of the need for a **comprehensive early childhood system**.

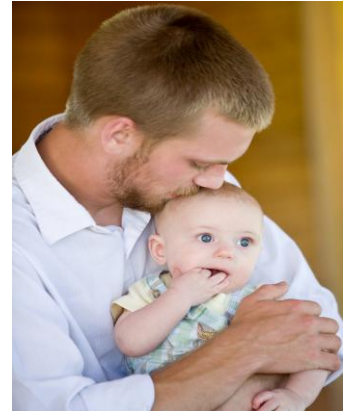


SCHEDULING A DATE

The Bus Tour is a great warm-up for the Star Power event in May, and you want to hold the bus tour during the day while early childhood programs are in session. Make sure to find out when (or if) the early education and care programs are having their respective Spring Breaks, which is often in the beginning of the month. Knowing that our state elected officials are responsible for being in Lansing on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, this leaves April 12, 19, 23, 26 and 30 as the dates to choose from (April 16 we will all be together for the GSC Conference). When reviewing your schedule you may decide locally to organize for early May.

WHO TO INVITE

The first people that you should invite as you narrow the date of your tour are currently serving legislators, since their schedules can be the most difficult to negotiate. Be sure that you extend an invitation to all of the Senators and State Representatives that serve your counties. When you call to invite them, you will most likely speak with a member of their staff who coordinates their schedule. It is helpful for their staff to know that you are calling on behalf of the GSC and GSPC members and that you are also extending an invitation to other state and local elected officials and you will need a response about their availability pretty quickly so that you can find the date that is most convenient for the majority of people.



Provide a few dates to choose from, a brief description of the purpose of this bus tour and a realistic time frame that this commitment will require. If one of your elected officials is unable to participate, consider inviting a member of his or her staff. They serve as advisors to the official and it is important that they understand the communities they represent, and may welcome the opportunity.

To locate the telephone numbers of your legislators, go to www.michigan.gov or look in the *Citizen's Guide to Michigan Government* provided at the Parent Leadership Institute.

Next, you should extend an invitation to the candidates that have either registered to run for office or have publically announced their candidacy. If a candidate has formally filed to run for office, they are listed on the www.michigan.gov/sos web site. This is the Secretary of State's web site. Once you get to this web site, click on the "2010 Unofficial Primary Candidate Listing" link. This will show all of the candidates to date, including their home addresses. For many of the candidates listed, you can click on their name and it will directly link you to their personal web site that lists their preferred contact information. If they have not completed the official paperwork with the State yet, watch the newspaper for information about who is suggesting that they are going to run.

Finally, consider which other local policymakers such as Mayors, Superintendants (both district and ISD), County Commissioners, School Board members, and media representatives that you and your colleagues might want to invite to participate. To find out the schedules and contact information of your local policymakers, visit the school, county, city or town's websites.

STEPS TO REMEMBER WHEN CREATING A SCHEDULE

As you discuss your proposed schedule, be mindful of the length of time that is reasonable to ask of the legislators and other participants. Most people will be comfortable with agreeing to a maximum of a 3-4 hour commitment. Therefore, as you create your schedule, prioritize the stops and topics.

The following are tasks that you will need to complete as you organize this event:

- 1. Organize transportation and an easily accessible beginning/ending location.**

(This may need to be determined once the schedule is finalized)

- 2. Have a conversation with the point person for each site that you will visit.**

(See appendix B for a listing of topics to include)

- 3. Determine how long the tour group can spend at each site.**

(Consider how long it will take to travel, unload, re-load etc.)

- 4. Make an invitation list, and request an RSVP to ensure that there is adequate space on the bus.**

(Include local program supporters who do not work in an early childhood occupation directly)

- 5. Invite parents and professionals to speak while you are traveling from one stop to another.**

(ie: Parents receiving in-home programs or sharing their personal stories)

- 6. Coordinate meals or snacks if it is appropriate**

(If you will be holding your tour over the lunch hour, consider having lunch at one of the program sites with children and staff instead of boxed lunches. Understand that this will require the cooperation of the center where you want to eat, and you may need to offer to pay for the additional lunches that the center will need to provide.)

- 7. Decide who is “in charge” of what on the day of the event.**

(See appendix A and B for suggestions of roles that should be assigned)

- 8. Send a press release and a copy of the itinerary to all of the county’s media outlets.**

(Photo opportunities of children and political candidates are always of interest!)

- 9. Send a reminder and an itinerary to each participant.**

(As a courtesy, be sure to let all of the participants know that the media will be in attendance.)

THE DAY OF THE TOUR

As the day arrives, you will want to create an atmosphere of comfort for every person participating. Remember, this is an exciting, and fun opportunity to make an impression on several people at once. Create name tags and organize a brief opportunity to introduce your participants, so that everyone has an idea of who is being represented and the connection each person has to the event and early childhood.



Remember to take a lot of pictures! These are wonderful for web sites, Facebook pages, promotional materials etc. Remember, though, that if you take pictures of children, you must organize a way in which you can obtain a photo release that is signed by the parent or guardian before publishing any pictures of children.

Elected Officials, the media and other participants will learn a lot about your county (or counties) on the day of the tour, and they should have materials to reinforce your message when they leave. Provide everyone with a copy of the packet of materials recommended by ECIC that will be sent the week of March 15, 2010. Make sure that they know that they can contact you as a resource on early childhood issues at any time and that you will be following up with them in the near future.

FOLLOW UP

Continue the excitement and relationships that were built during your time together by following up with a thank you note to all of the participants on the tour and the people who made the visits happen. Thank everyone for taking the time to learn about your community and remind them about the impact that they can make in the lives of children. Include the contact information for all of the participants in the tour, in case they are interested in making contact in the future.



Post photos of the day to your web site and Facebook and share the experience through pictures and a de-briefing meeting with the GSC and GSPC members who weren't able to participate. And finally, remind the legislators that you are looking forward to seeing them again on May 19th at the Star Power Rally!

¹ Background on *The Great Start Initiative* (Early Childhood Investment Corporation, 2003).

² Investing in Young Children: The First Step on the Path to Economic Prosperity in Michigan (Early Childhood Investment Corporation, January 30, 2010).³ Background on *The Great Start Initiative* (Early Childhood Investment Corporation, 2003).

Reference: The Baby Monitor Policy and Advocacy News: Zero to Three www.zerotothree.org. "How to Plan a Site Visit: Inviting Policymakers to See Your Work with Infants, Toddlers and Their Families." January 11, 2010.

Appendix A

A Bus Tour Planning Team should include members of both the GSC and the GSPC that are invested in creating system changes in your county. Certainly, the GSC Director and the GSPC Parent Liaison will take an active role in planning this tour, but it is important for elected officials to see that GSC and GSPC members are also invested. Involving five GSC members, (one for each of the five component areas) as well as an active member of the GSPC would provide a well-balanced mix to the planning team.

Appendix B

One of the important tasks in preparing for a bus tour is the careful selection and coordination of each of the stops, It is critical that each site is prepared for the visit. The following are suggestions of points that need to be covered early in the planning process.

- Get an idea of how long you will need to be at this stop
- Determine if there is an ideal time to be visiting during the day
- Help them to prepare and prioritize the tour of their program/school
- Ask them to prepare information that can be covered on the way to the site (ie: how many children are served, where funding comes from, the impact the program has on the community, challenges being faced by this program and the children or families in this community)
- Check on confidentiality issues regarding picture taking and the media
- Remind them that it is important to ensure that the staff and parents are advised about and comfortable with a elected officials and other people visiting and observing the program and their children.
- Remind them that it is a good idea to give advance notice to anyone who will be involved in the visit, so they have time to plan accordingly, and ask questions before the visit. Make sure that the teachers and other employees know that the purpose of this visit is to learn more about their work, not to judge or watch, and that it could result in increased support for the program or project. Remind them that they do not need to prepare for the visit – they can dress and act as they would any other day.
- Try to think “outside the box” together, and create interactive opportunities for the tour participants with children and staff instead of mere observation. Perhaps the teachers can choose to do an activity that really showcases their work with the children. Consider inviting the elected official and a GSPC parent to sit-in during an activity that would help him/her understand the impact this program has on infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

There are several roles that will need to be assumed by members of the Bus Tour Planning Team in order for the tour to run smoothly. Assigning roles to each of the key members will help to keep the tour running smoothly. The following are suggestions of some of the roles that will need to be assigned:

- Who will narrate and lead the tour
- Who will be in charge of the media and provide interviews or statements
- Who is keeping track of time to keep the tour on schedule? (It is very important to respect people’s time – the tour should start and end on time)
- Who is going to take pictures
- Who will collect materials at each stop and be responsible for the distribution of materials at the conclusion of the tour.