

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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*The purpose of the ABC Project is to have a community system that ensures that all young children have all the formational, health, family, and early learning experiences that they need to enter school healthy and ready to succeed.*

## **Situation**

Research tells us that young children develop optimally when they have interactive relationships and experiences that become more complex with time, and the settings in which young children have these experiences and relationships are interconnected. Early childhood experiences form the basis of future learning and competency. Our pre-school children are starting school soon and the sooner the ABC project is put into operation, the quicker the children within the community will be prepared to succeed in school. Time was getting short to meet the ever more critical educational and workforce development needs.

It shouldn't be surprising that the kindergarten teachers of the Oconto Falls School District have reported that only two-thirds of the children entering their classrooms are prepared to be successful students. And sadly, even our best schools aren't able to alter the course of many of these children who begin school behind. By the third grade, only four out of five of Wisconsin's children read at a proficient or higher level. By eighth grade, the percentage of students who achieve at a proficient or higher level in reading is still only 83% and in math it's only 73%.

This problem will have immediate economic consequences for our communities and state. The national "No Child Left Behind" legislation requires that an increasing percentage of Wisconsin's school children read and do math at the proficient or higher level each year or the school district will face sanctions. By 2013, 100% of our children are expected to meet this standard. This is an admirable goal, but one that cannot be accomplished if we wait until our children walk through the kindergarten door. And the problem of children arriving at school with vastly different levels of experience – and the resulting achievement gap - are likely to have important long-term economic consequences as well. The level at which children enter school often determines their future school and life successes. Demographic trends and economic outlook necessitate a fully developed and highly productive workforce. Education will be a major factor in workforce development based on emerging skill needs.

To reach their full potential, all young children need early and consistent health care, loving families who can guide them and advocate for them, and high quality early education and care opportunities. We need to begin early with prenatal care. We need to find ways to support families in the important roles they play. And we know that focusing on ABCs and numbers isn't nearly enough – physical and mental health, social and communication skills, and attitudes toward learning are at least as important. There are no magic solutions. A single program alone, no matter how well designed and implemented, cannot provide children with all of these things they need. For all of our children to start school ready to succeed, we need to plan, finance, implement, coordinate, evaluate, and sustain high quality systems that connect diverse early childhood programs, services, and resources. These systems should be designed to reflect our best available scientific knowledge.

## Response

UW-Extension's ABC Project provides research-based systems planning assistance to Wisconsin communities who desire to ensure that all their young children have all of the early health, family, and the education and care experiences they need to enter school healthy and ready to succeed. The project provides a system planning framework to enable a local community to design an "ideal system" that will meet the above experiences.

The ABC Project's foundation lies in the ecological model of human development. It is this child development model that provides the sound research base of this project. It's generally easier and cheaper to provide children with early experiences that will result in their growing up healthy and successful than it is to try to provide needed experiences later. It's also usually less costly than paying for later adult failures like crime or unemployment. For example, most children's lives move along a trajectory that becomes difficult to alter by the time they begin kindergarten. Children who arrive at school eager to learn, able to communicate, and able to behave appropriately are likely to continue on a positive path. When children arrive at kindergarten not trusting adults or not able to communicate with them or not ever having owned a book or held a pair of scissors, it is extremely difficult for schools to help them catch up, even with expensive remedial or special education. In most cases, it's not that it **MUST** be done early or we lose the chance forever – but it does become much harder, less likely to achieve total success, and almost always more expensive the longer we wait.

The ABC project builds on a systems theory of human development that was developed by a psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner. Over the past 25 years, this theory has become one of the main theories that researchers use to describe and explain the development of children and that policymakers use to create policies related to young children and their families.

The Oconto Falls School District readiness assessment indicated the School District had a number of needed pieces in place. A six member sponsor team was formed to lend credibility to the project and to identify the planning team (PT). The nine member PT met each month from August 2004-August 2005. The PT used the ABC project timeline to stay on task. A brief overview is listed below.

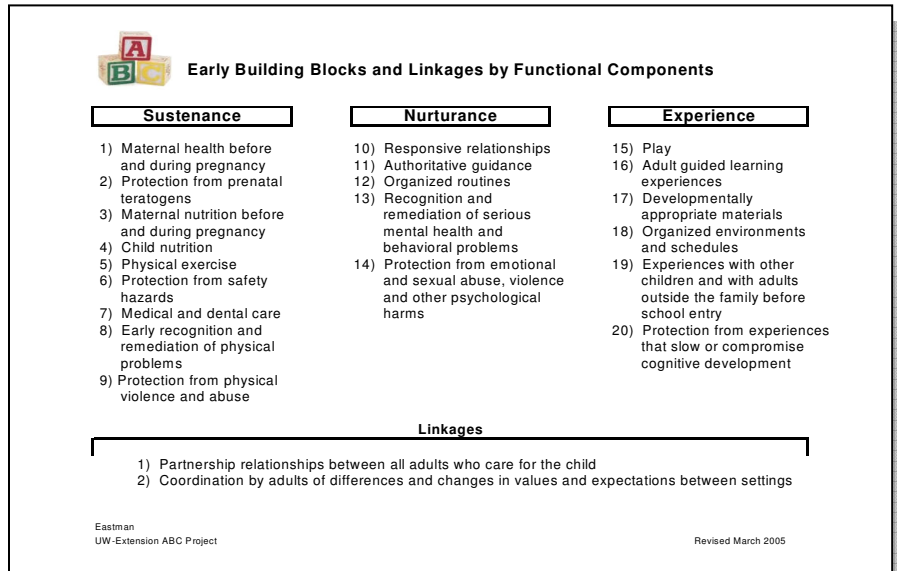
### **ABC Project Timeline**

- 1. Select the Community of Interest [April, 2004]**
- 2. Plan the ABC Project Planning System [May – June, 2004]**
- 3. Detail and Install the Planning System [September, 2004]**
- 4. Gather and Assess Basic Information [October, 2004]**
- 5. Explain ABC Project Basis & Functional Components [November, 2004]**
- 6. Generate Ideal Systems [December, 2004 – February, 2005]**
- 7. Develop Recommended Solution [February-June, 2005]**  
*[The work in this step is done by component workgroups CWG and the planning team PT]*
- 8. Obtain Approval(s) [July-August, 2005]**
- 9. Implement Approved ABC Project System [September, 2005]**
- 10. Monitor for Continuing Change & Improvement [September and onward]**

A shared leadership approach was used to ensure that the project belonged to the community. The PT identified Component Workgroup (CWG) members to work with them on the final identification of the system plan. The CWG met from April to June, 2005.

Component Workgroup members were organized into three component

subsystems. The graphic above illustrates the components along with the Building Blocks/experiences deemed by research that best accompanies each of them as seen in the chart below:



Each CWG reported their major alternative and the PT determined the over arching major alternatives (solution) for the ABC system plan in the next five to seven years, as detailed in the following recommendation.

## Recommendations to Community

A local intermediary non-profit organization will need to be created in the Oconto Falls community to carry out the ABC project purpose (.....to ensure that all young children have all the foundational health, family, and early learning experience that they need to enter school healthy and ready to succeed). This organization will specialize in dealing with disconnected services, separate funding streams, and multiple agencies providing services, and will be responsible as a liaison between the services currently being provided within the community. Identification of key personnel within the System recommendation should be completed by the identified leaders within the community (Sponsors group). Funding as well as other support for the System should be “championed” by the Sponsor group. It is envisioned that the original Sponsor Group be expanded to include other “Key Stakeholders” and leaders within the community broadening support for the project’s recommendations

In a planned attempt to keep this project and its recommendations moving forward, a timeline of implementation events has been developed. It is suggested that the recommended “*ABC System*” be reviewed by the Sponsors immediately after the Planning Team publishes this document. The community and the Stakeholders should be shown the findings of the Planning Team after review by the project’s Sponsors. If the Sponsors agree to the recommendations of the Planning Team, then a number of public listening sessions, media coverage, displays, etc., could take place affording an

opportunity for public feedback. If the Sponsors wish to make changes to the recommendations, they should meet with the Planning Team to see if these changes still meet the intended Purpose Statement of the ABC Project. It is further envisioned that the recommendations within this document be reviewed no later than 180 days by the Sponsor group to ensure they are acted upon/addressed and that a further After Action Review (AAR) be conducted no later than 12 to 18 months to gauge the effectiveness of the actions taken to-date. See *chapter seven* Future Planning and Implementation for the full chart.

## Conclusion

It has been said that there are five areas of capital within a society. How they are developed and how they are maintained will determine a community's economic future. The five areas are:

1. **Human Capital** – Economic development starts with strong families, to develop strong families you should focus on (1) family financial management, (2) proper health care and nutritional attainment, and (3) parenting education;
2. **Social Capital** – “The currency of social capital is trust”- trust can be developed in communities and its local environs through local leadership development/education which involves all community members especially the youth;
3. **Economic Capital** – Economic development involves having (1) a competitive/viable environment, (2) having opportunity for job and income growth, and (3) being able to capitalize on opportunities;
4. **Creative Capital** – Communities that embrace innovation, creativity and diversity have (1) the ability to attract businesses, (2) have an entrepreneurial spirit within the community, (3) have ability to conform to changes or mold environment to local needs, (4) and have a stimulating community with diverse environments (parks, trails, landmarks, etc.). It is important to be reminded that today's young people first choose a location they want to live in before they choose a job;
5. **Environmental Capital** – being good stewards of the natural environment is necessary for a healthy environment.

“The *ABC project* value adds to each of the five capitals above for positive social growth because it focuses on the future investments of our community – its future workforce & entrepreneurs; its future leaders; its future stewards; future heads of families; in other words our greatest assets... our community's children.” – Dale Mohr, Community Development Educator -

