STATE FUNDING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN RURAL KANSAS:
PERCEPTIONS OF POLICYMAKERS, EARLY CHILDHOOD ADVOCATES, AND
SUPERINTENDENTS

A Dissertation by

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STATE FUNDING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN RURAL KANSAS: PERCEPTIONS OF POLICYMAKERS, EARLY CHILDHOOD ADVOCATES, AND SUPERINTENDENTS

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this manuscript to my wife Carla and our children, Bradley, Mitchell, and Jacob, for their encouragement, patience, and support through my educational journey.

Lastly, I dedicate this culmination of my educational journey to my parents, Dal and Connie Argabright, for teaching me to believe that anything is possible with hard work, commitment and to have the courage to finish.
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ABSTRACT

The benefits of early childhood education have been empirically supported. Early childhood education programs in Kansas are not fully funded and available in all communities. Some rural communities in Kansas do not offer a state supported four year old programs.

The purpose of this study was to understand what and who influences the development of early childhood education policy in Kansas. The study sought to understand the political environment and how elected policymakers, superintendents, and advocacy groups affect policy decisions in funding early childhood education.

Participants in this study included members of the House of Representatives, State Senators, State Board of Education members, Advocacy groups, and Superintendents. Twenty six individual interviews were conducted across four geographical quadrants in Kansas.

The findings delivered conclusions that were analyzed through the theoretical framework of Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), and provides implications for advancing early childhood policy development in rural Kansas. An increased interest in early childhood education was noted by elected officials. Professional educators had a significant influence on elected policymakers. Advocacy groups provided technical and scientific information but rural areas were not impacted by these groups.

Implications of this study included a need for collaboration of stakeholders to market and advance rural early childhood initiatives. There is a need for internal and external shocks to move early childhood education forward. Rural communities could benefit by utilizing partnerships to strengthen community buy-in and sustain early childhood programs. A collective support of participants in the study indicates a growing interest in early childhood education for all children in Kansas.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Background

Positive outcomes in early childhood and readiness programs for 3-4 year old children have been noted in research studies (Barnett, 2002). The demonstrated benefits of early childhood programs are numerous and include increased student achievement with long term improvements in the intellectual and social development of children throughout their K-12 academic years (Barnett, 1995). Providing young children with early intervention academic programs prior to kindergarten has been linked to increased high school graduation rates (Lee, Drake, Pennucci, Bjornstad, & Edovald, 2012). Children exposed to reading readiness models prior to entering kindergarten scored higher than children within the same socio-economic status entering kindergarten without this exposure (Pigott & Israel, 2005). If Pre-K programs include support for growth in cognition, language, motor skills, adaptive skills and social-emotional functioning, the child is more likely to succeed in school and later contribute to society (Erickson & Kurz-Riemer, 2002). Without support during these early years, a child is more likely to drop out of school, receive welfare benefits, and commit crimes (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003).

Because of these positive outcomes, early childhood advocacy groups are committed to promoting universal school readiness by giving all children access to opportunities that recognize and support children’s individual differences and promote school success (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Advocacy groups range from those whose sole focus is early childhood readiness programs to school administrators groups and other education coalitions that have an interest in early childhood. Nationally, business organizations have also been touting the benefits of early childhood programs and calling for additional support. Between 2007 and 2012, in 88% of states (44) at least one state chamber of commerce, large city
chamber, or business roundtable reported that it had supported at least one early childhood policy initiative or program (Ready Nation, 2013).

Kansas has established advocacy groups within the general education field. Examples of organized advocacy coalitions in Kansas include the Kansas National Education Association (KNEA), Kansas Association of School Boards (KASB), Kansas School Superintendent Association (KSSA), Kansas Association of Secondary School Principals (KASSP), Kansas Association of Elementary School Principals (KAESP), United School Administrators (USA), and many more. Early childhood education is one of the many educational issues these groups promote. Private groups working specifically with early childhood include the Coalition for School Readiness (which is a part of Kansas Action for Children) and the Kansas Children’s Service League. The Kansas Coalition for School Readiness is a partnership of early learning advocates and practitioners, business leaders, parents, law enforcement, and other interested Kansans who have come together to support investment in early childhood education so that children are better prepared for success in school and beyond (Kansas Coalition for School Readiness, 2013). The Kansas Action for Children has become one of the nation’s leading child advocacy organizations (Kansas Action for Children, 2013).

The federal government’s early childhood education policy making efforts have primarily focused on making services available to children who are at risk due to economic, biological, social, or psychological circumstances or combinations of these; or to provide child care services as an incentive for mothers receiving social assistance to gain entry to the labor force (J. Johnson & Strange, 2009). Students have benefited from these programs vested in readiness for kindergarten and primary grade levels with evidence to forecast a child’s subsequent performance and development (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Nonetheless, the United States has no
coherent policy on the provision of early childhood education. The primary responsibility for education is at the level of the states, not the federal government (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). Because the federal government has a limited role to play, funding early childhood educational programs is primarily left to the state, whose policies dictate the level and amount of funding given to school districts.

At the state level, policy decisions about pre-school education are made with regard to eligibility and extent of supply and availability of services, including health and safety standards (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). According to the 2012 State of Preschool Report, 28% of America’s 4-year-olds were enrolled in a state-funded preschool program in the 2011-12 school year. State level participation for early childhood initiatives has varied as indicated in the report (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2012). States have initiated programs and conducted studies examining the feasibility for early childhood education. According to previous reports, the quality of these programs ranged from poor to excellent and funding levels varied from state to state (Barnett, Hustedt, Hawkinson, & Robin, 2007). Many states confront challenges with creating and sustaining early childhood programs and the result is K-12 educational programs get prioritized due to funding structures within the political environment (Barnett et al., 2012). Public schools are obligated to provide K-12 education, but are not required to offer programs for preschool age children.

The capacity to provide early childhood programs is especially lacking in rural settings (Sipple, McCabe, & Ross-Bernstein, 2007). Most people living in rural areas have an interest in and need for a successful early childhood program. In a study that examined priorities of education in a rural setting, the data suggested that rural communities desire access to a holistic
educational experience that responds to the needs of early childhood, K-12 public education, and adult education (Wallin, 2008).

Rural areas make up just over half of Kansas 293 public school districts. Nearly half of these rural districts enroll fewer than 535 students (J. Johnson & Strange, 2009). Rural Kansas will be defined in this study using the Census Bureau’s land use concept that includes open countryside and settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). Although rural is defined by residents in specific locations, this study will focus on school districts in rural areas of Kansas. Rural Kansas school districts are normally associated with small communities dedicated to agriculture and small business (Harmon, 2013). In many cases, citizens of small rural areas traveled to larger communities or cities for purchasing household necessities because low populated areas may not have a large commerce base. For athletic and activity purposes, Kansas high schools were classified according to size, with 1A, 2A, and 3A comprising the smallest schools and 4A, 5A, and 6A comprising the largest schools. Classifications for grades 9-12 in 2012-13 ranged from 15 students in the smallest 1A school to 2,276 students in the largest 6A school (Kansas State High School Activities Association, 2013). For this study, a rural town with a population of less than 2,500 generally fit the Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) classification of 1A-3A size school districts and selected participants will be associated with districts of that size. Rural communities vary in available resources and building capacities (Harmon, 2013).

School districts in Kansas are charged with governing their K-12 academic programs with the funding available from state revenues and supplemental local option budgets. Operating budgets require a large amount of the available revenues for local school districts to properly function (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012d). Funding for early childhood is a small
percentage of the overall general operating fund and local option budget in Kansas. Small amounts of available revenues can be utilized for other local board of education priorities, such as pre-school and early childhood education. Kansas, like other states, has an obligation to fund K-12 education therefore local school boards struggle to fund early childhood initiatives.

**Problem Statement**

Because there is no coherent federal policy on early childhood programs and most states do not offer universal services for children 3-4 years of age, federal and state funding provides limited resources for local public school districts to fully develop researched-based programs. Although research supports the efficacy of early childhood programs, barriers such as politics and policies affecting funding make it difficult for public schools to fully implement needed programs (Gallagher & Clifford, 2000).

Educational policies are developed in an atmosphere where those responsible for public education have many competing areas of interest. These policies have direct effects on funding availability, and significantly impact the attainment or denial of funding for early childhood programs (Lemay, 2013). Additionally, when it concerns early childhood education, supplemental funding, transportation, age appropriate facilities, teacher certification, options for daycare to offset half day programs, curriculum choice, and required fees to supplement these programs are commonly caught up in politics and policies affecting or limiting the program (Greif, 2004). Politics exerts a strong influence on education policy making in part because elected officials necessarily must try to anticipate how their policy statements and actions might affect their chances for reelection (Kraft & Furlong, 2012). Elected officials have incoming and outgoing communication channels with advocacy groups that form around early childhood legislative issues. Advocacy groups within the private and public sectors play a role in funding
early childhood initiatives in some states. For example, early childhood advocates in California were pleased to see $55 million restored funding with $30 million of those funds going to the state’s preschool program in addition to their current budget (EdSource, 2013). In North Carolina, legislative action authorized the Smart Start program. North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc., (NCPC) was authorized in 1993 to provide statewide oversight with Smart Start and required to raise $1 for every $10 it received from the state, but historically has raised a minimum of $1 for every $7 of private funding (Ounce, 2012). In 2004, three foundations in Pennsylvania pooled their funds to create a pre-K partnership and engaged four additional foundations to raise a total of $11 million. Since 2007, a Foundation alone has invested almost $20 million to advancing Illinois’ early childhood system. Early childhood constituents rely upon interest groups to advocate and call for policies that require funding for programs.

Although research findings have shown strong correlations between early childhood interventions and positive results impacting student achievement, not all communities in rural Kansas benefit from state-funded early childhood programs. In order to understand the status of early childhood funding, it is important to understand how Kansas funds its public schools.

**Funding Education in Kansas**

The Kansas State Board of Education is comprised of elected officials whose responsibility is to provide oversight for public education. Board members are charged with developing requirements for K-12 education programs but rely upon the legislature to fund these recommendations. State legislators annually appropriate funding to K-12 local school districts and make decisions about how much money districts receive for their general operating fund. School districts are then required to fulfill K-12 academic programs utilizing this state fund. Funds are allocated based on student enrollment as of the 20th day of September each school
year. K-12 programs must be paid before funds can be used for other academic programs including early childhood. Additionally, although kindergarten has increased from half day to full time attendance in many school districts across Kansas, kindergarten students are only reimbursed at a rate of .50 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) and local boards must make up the remaining costs (Kansas State Department of Education, 2013a).

To complicate matters, Kansas Governor Brownback and current legislative leadership has shifted to a conservative atmosphere in recent years. The results of a conservative political climate have been cuts to K-12 education and opposition to additional funding for early childhood programs (N. Johnson, Oliff, & Williams, 2011). The political atmosphere surrounding elected officials, such as State Board members, legislators, and the Governor, have had a profound influence on public education. Consequently, general operating funds allocated for Kansas schools have not been sufficient to fulfill all K-12 requirements, therefore district administrators must utilize supplemental general funding, also called the local option budget (LOB).

In Kansas, LOB funds are monetary resources school districts acquire through annual budget dollars made available and prioritized by the local board of education. LOB funds assist in supplementing revenues to programs budgeted within the general fund where additional funds are needed to operate programs. Kansas’ public schools are allowed to levy up to 30% of the general fund, or as determined by the state legislature, to annually budget in the LOB. Local boards of education determine and establish this percentage or dollar amount each fiscal year. The funds are levied at the local level with assistance from a state formula that equalizes a portion of the total amount in state aid (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012c).
Funding Early Childhood in Kansas

Kansas school districts are currently serving 7,854 four-year old at-risk students (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012b), but many more 3 and 4 year old children are not being served. Early childhood program funding varies from district to district depending on the amount received from state, local, and private sources, and whether a district has made it a priority. Funding for early childhood programs is one of the driving factors in the availability, frequency, and duration of programs across the state. The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) currently oversees two grant-funded early childhood programs: the Pre-School Program and State Pre-kindergarten Program (previously known as the 4 year old at-risk program). Both of these programs target at-risk 4-year olds; there are no state supported programs for 3-year olds.

The Kansas Pre-School program established in 2006 was moved to KSDE in May of 2008 by legislative action. Formerly, it was a pilot program administered by the Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund as a part of the state’s tobacco lawsuit settlement and is solely funded by tobacco dollars (Barnett et al., 2012). The purpose of this program is to promote school readiness through preschool experiences for children ages 3-5 that are community-based and high quality (Kansas State Department of Education, 2013b). The Pre-School program outcome is for children to enter school ready to succeed. The framework of the grant proposal must reflect community input and the proposed strategies represent research and evidence-based practices in early childhood care and education. Currently, the Pre-school program has 12 sites in 14 counties (Kansas State Department of Education, 2013b).

The State Pre-Kindergarten Program for 4-year-olds is partially state funded through grant applications for qualifying students with a limited amount of funding slots approved each
year (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012b). Kansas has established criteria for students to qualify with predetermined poverty levels being the highest qualifying area. These qualified students receive partial funding unless a student has special services qualifications, then he or she receives full funding (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012a). The number of funding slots available has not increased since the 2008-09 school year due to budget shortfalls. State legislators annually appropriate the number of partially funded grants in early childhood. Due to tax cuts resulting in budget shortfalls, the level of program availability varies across Kansas public schools.

Early childhood funding avenues for rural Kansas public school districts include general fund, LOB, and state grant applications for qualified students. Funding is tied to enrollments, thus due to lower enrollments in rural districts, early childhood programs are dependent upon state grant funding. The availability of funding is questionable each year due to state grant approvals and available operating general and LOB funds. Planning toward even a partially funded early childhood program requires local districts to make it a priority from general and supplemental funds, if those funds are available.

Even though the benefits of early childhood programs are well-known, programs are difficult to establish, fully implement for all students, and sustain within rural communities in Kansas (Mann & Williams, 2011a). Early childhood education is generally supported and valued in rural communities but are not always available (Temple, 2009). Even though a universal approach costs more, the added benefits are likely to far exceed the added costs as universal public preschool education is likely to produce far greater economic benefits than an income-targeted approach (Barnett, 2010). However, in the current political climate in which state legislators have cut funding for K-12 education, it is even more challenging to advocate for
funding of early childhood education programs in rural areas. Kansas early childhood advocates have attempted to exert pressure on legislators to fund programs, but in the current political climate, they have had little success in persuading legislators to make early childhood education a priority.

**Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand what and who influences the development of early childhood education policy and legislative funding in Kansas. The study sought to understand the political environment and how state elected officials, superintendents, and advocacy groups affect policy recommendations in early childhood opportunities in rural Kansas school districts. I also examined areas to which the relationship between the school district, elected officials, and advocacy groups could be strengthened to increase early educational opportunities for students.

Research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of superintendents, advocacy groups, and elected State education policymakers on what influences policy decisions about early childhood programs for 3-4 year olds in rural Kansas?
2. What do superintendents, advocacy groups, and State education policymakers identify as factors critical to sustaining early childhood education programs in rural Kansas school districts?
3. What are the perceptions of superintendents, advocacy groups, and State education policymakers on the influence of advocacy groups on early childhood education policies?
The research questions guiding this study are tied to the development of education policy. In an effort to better understand policy development, this study will look through the lenses of Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF).

**Theoretical Framework: Advocacy Coalition**

Neopluralist advocacy coalition and interest group theories are political science perspectives that seek to answer “who gets what, when, and how” as coalitions struggle to obtain resources from the government (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993). The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) was initially devised by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith in the late 1980’s and more recently has been expanded and clarified (Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009). The ACF focuses on policy learning and policy change within a policy subsystem. Policy learning encompasses an increased knowledge of problem parameters. The factors, dynamics, and changing perceptions of the probable impacts of alternative policies also contributes to policy learning, particularly across coalitions where networks learn from the past (Sabatier, 2007). The use of the term subsystem is viewing the influence of systems language on advocacy coalition theories (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Coalitions aim to have their shared beliefs translated into public policies. They operate within a “policy subsystem” that includes perhaps one dominant coalition and one or two subordinate ones. The policy subsystem includes a broad range of actors concerned with a particular policy area, such as public education (Vergari, 2007). Participants in the subsystem include interest groups; administrative agencies; legislative committees; analysts; researchers; others who generate, disseminate, and evaluate policy ideas; and actors in government who are active in the policy formation and policy implementation processes (Sabatier, 1988).
The ACF is composed of five foundational premises (Sabatier, 1999). First, scientific and technical information are given a central role in the policy process. This study relied upon the empirical basis for the importance of early childhood education as the scientific information. Second, a time perspective of ten years or more was required to understand policy change. In this study, policies and limited funding opportunities had been in place for over ten years; therefore these effects specifically tied to opportunities of early childhood education will have significant value. Third, the policy subsystem (defined by policy topic, geographic scope, and influencing actors) was the primary unit of analysis. For the purpose of this study, the policy topic was funding early childhood education, the geographic scope was rural Kansas school districts, and the influencing actors were elected officials, superintendents, and advocacy groups. Fourth, the set of policy subsystem actors was lengthened beyond the traditional members to include officials from several levels of state government, possibly including consultants, specialists, and Kansas State Department of Education officials regarding their potential influence on early childhood education policy and funding. Fifth, policies and programs were viewed as interpretations of beliefs (Sabatier, 1999). In this qualitative study, participants’ interpretations and beliefs were central.

According to ACF, policy change occurs as a result of policy learning through external shocks (Nowlin, 2011). External shocks include change in governing coalitions, public opinion, and other outputs from other subsystems (Sabatier, 1999). Possible external shocks relevant to this study included private sector influences, faith-based influences, public perceptions, changes in elected parties, and other external groups. Private and faith-based influences in rural areas included church-affiliated preschool providers. The public’s perceptions concerning what age and when public schools should require attendance for young children were potential external
shocks. Elections that change the vision of early childhood responsibilities at federal, state, and local levels may create external shocks.

Recent iterations of the ACF have added internal shocks and negotiated agreements between coalitions as factors influencing policy change (Weible et al., 2009). Internal shocks were defined as policy dimension shifts that occur when strategic policy entrepreneurs import arguments from another proximate linked subsystem (Jones & Jenkins-Smith, 2009). Possible internal shocks relevant to this study included kindergarten programs, additional K-12 funding, or the development of state policies affecting low socio-economic families generating additional funding. Young children’s lack of readiness and academic deficiencies in early elementary school has the potential to be internal shocks to spur more early childhood initiatives.

A basic principle of ACF is that coalitions possess a well-developed belief system that is organized on three levels: deep core beliefs; policy core beliefs and secondary beliefs that affect political behaviors (Weible et al., 2009). This system of beliefs organizes fundamental values and perceptions and connects them to the causes of policy problems and consequently to suitable approaches for their resolution. At the top of the belief system lie deep core beliefs; this might include funding positions stemming from positions on additional taxing. Deep core beliefs examples include conservative and liberal beliefs. This tier does not commonly change within a subsystem. In the middle of the belief hierarchy is the policy core beliefs, which is of moderate scope, meaning they span the fundamental and geographic scope of a policy subsystem. Policy core beliefs are resistant to change but more likely to adjust in response to verification and refutation from new experiences and information (Weible et al., 2009). At the bottom of the belief system is the secondary beliefs, which are more substantively and geographically narrow.
in scope and are more likely to change over time. Secondary beliefs are more empirically based and most likely to change in response to new information (Weible & Sabatier, 2006).

For example, a study with farmers that used the ACF established the structure of policy and noted trust was heavily swayed by the political values and policy-core beliefs of farmers (Lubell, 2007). Policy-core beliefs reinforce political divides by providing more stability to trusting relationships with organizations that have similar policy-core beliefs to farmers. According to ACF, trust was a function of the similarity between the policy-core beliefs of the one trusting and those of the trustee (Leach & Sabatier, 2005). People will trust actors they believe have similar beliefs and interests to their own, and their trust will decline as the difference in policy-core beliefs increase. One of the clearest findings in the study was that trust is higher among participants who planned to interrelate with the other members of the partnership over the next five years. Relevant to this study, trustful information for stakeholders participating and advocacy groups alike may have significance.

Advocacy group perspectives in policymaking gain attention from theorists studying the impact of these subgroups within the policy making process. Theorists have examined the processes of policy formation over several years as advocacy groups joined together in the struggle to shape policies that attacked segregation and poverty and their effects on children’s learning and achievement (Cooper et al., 2004). Advocacy group models gain attention as battles begin and they attempt to hammer out compromises in order to win legislative support along with support from the field. Interest and advocacy groups have a high probability of affecting policy outcomes when they face little or no opposition from other policy actors or policy actors are undecided on an issue (Opfer, Young, & Fusarelli, 2008). Understanding the policy process requires looking at an intergovernmental policy community or subsystem.
composed of bureaucrats, legislative personnel, interest group leaders, researchers, and specialist reporters within a substantive policy area as the basic unit of study (Sabatier, 1991). Given the great differences in their values, beliefs, and priorities, interest and advocacy groups interact at various conflict levels to gain support or distract a policy move that is not favorable. Advocacy groups learn how to best play the political game to achieve their policy objectives.

Policy subsystems have been the dominant level of analysis for many policy theories and frameworks (Nowlin, 2011). Policy subsystems tend to remain stable even after significant external disruptions, confirming assumptions about how subsystems bring stability to the policymaking process (May, Sapotichne, & Workman, 2009). Recent research has begun to focus on various types of subsystems including unitary, collaborative, and adversarial (Weible, 2008). The type of subsystem can have a direct bearing on the types of coalitions within that subsystem. For example, a collaborative subsystem might have multiple coalitions while a unitary subsystem would contain a single cooperative coalition, and an adversarial subsystem would contain multiple competing coalitions (Weible, 2008). An example of a collaborative subsystem in Kansas’ education is the United School Administrators (USA), a group that tries to send one message to policymakers from many organizations regarding legislative action on education bills. Researchers continue to move beyond the subsystem level of analysis in policy making as policy problems typically encompass more than one subsystem. This study collected and analyzed qualitative data to identify what type(s) of subsystem(s) and internal and external shocks in rural Kansas schools affecting the development of early childhood education policies.

In this study, ACF was chosen because it represents a productive approach in which basic research assumptions have been carefully developed and substantial amounts of empirical work have been completed. For example, significant policy development in Minnesota has been
linked to a useful approach of advocacy coalition model in understanding changes in that state’s education system (Opfer et al., 2008). A major advantage of ACF with educational policy is that models of advocacy coalitions incorporate a change component. ACF is interactive, dynamic, changing, and flexible (Cooper et al., 2004). The ACF provides an explanation of the role that beliefs and policy learning play in affecting policy choices.

For the purposes of this study, early childhood education policy in Kansas is a subsystem where the scientific research on the benefits of early childhood education is expected to play a significant role. The policy topic will be funding early childhood education, the geographical scope will be rural Kansas school districts, and the actors will be early childhood advocacy groups, rural district superintendents, and state level actors including elected policymakers. Internal and external shocks will be studied within the subsystems in an effort to explain over time what effects they have had on policy development.

The interaction within the subsystem of early childhood in the literature framed the study. The principal knowledge conflict outlined in the proposal is supported by the knowledge available through empirical research on the importance of early childhood programming and how it interacts with funding policies, which have limited opportunities in rural areas. The lack of sensitivity to rural needs in early childhood sets the stage for the literature reviewed for this study.
CHAPTER 2

Review of Research and Literature

Early childhood programs as described in the literature and used for this study represent those years prior to kindergarten, and generally include three and four year old children. A literature review presents a logically argued case founded on a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge about a topic of study (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). Several areas within the literature were explored to bring an extensive overview of the relevance and benefits of early childhood education policy and funding to consistently deliver and sustain early childhood/readiness programs in rural school districts.

Low-income families have been targeted in most states as the starting point for developing initiatives. The chances are higher for low socio-economic students to be successful if interventions/programs are implemented in early years (Fischel et al., 2007). The literature review includes studies outlining the benefits of early intervention, its cognitive and social implications, as well as studies concerned with state policy, funding, and advocacy groups in early childhood education.

Benefits of Early Childhood Programs

In the ACF, scientific and technical information are given a central role in the policy process. The established bodies of evidence through empirical studies that have identified the short- and long-term benefits of early childhood education comprise the scientific information premise of the ACF as applied to this study. Therefore, this section examines these studies supporting the benefits of readiness programs such as Head Start. Studies that identified general benefits including increased intelligence levels in reading and math, economic benefits,
interpersonal skills, emotional support, and work related skills resulting from participation in early childhood education were discussed.

Since the establishment of Head Start, a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services initiative, and Title I, a U.S. Department of Education initiative, early childhood programs have been seen as a prevailing tool for accomplishing the goal of decreasing cognitive disparities at school entry along ethnic and socioeconomic lines (St Pierre & Rossi, 2006). Early Head Start is a federal program that began in 1965 for low-income pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers. Programs with strong and numerous effects were those that offered a mix of home-visit and center-based services. In a study that measured whether the Early Head Start program had a significant influence on child and parenting outcomes at age three when the program ended, encouraging results occurred (Love et al., 2005). Results revealed positive effects on children’s cognitive and language development and aspects of children’s social-emotional development. The Early Head Start program produced positive outcomes on emotional support and on parental support for language and learning, therefore increasing parents’ emotional engagement with their children. Children sustained attention with play objects and demonstrated less aggressive behavior. As a federally funded program, Head Start received considerable national attention, when other early childhood programs at the state and local level were being initiated and studied over the long term.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study is considered one of the pioneering projects that introduced early childhood education in America. The project served 58 African American children, 3-4 years of age, from low-income homes and deemed at risk of failing school because of environmental factors and low IQ scores (Schweinhart et al., 2005). The study was conducted between 1962 and 1967 in Michigan and placed a higher emphasis on education than most early
childhood programs at the time. Follow-ups of project participants and control group were conducted at ages 14-15, 19, and 27. Impactful findings related to early childhood education included higher monthly earnings, higher percentages of home ownership, higher level of schooling reported, lower percentage of social services, and fewer arrests. Project participants compared to the control group showed higher achievement at age 14, lower participation in special education programs, and higher scores on the Adult Performance Level Survey at age 19. Further studies indicated continued benefits to the participants at age 40 (Belfield, Nores, Barnett, & Schweinhart, 2006).

Another well-known long-term project was the Abecedarian Study (ABC Study), which admitted 112 North Carolina children between the fall of 1972 and the late summer of 1977 based upon a systematic risk screening conducted in the Health Department, the department of Social Services, and the local maternity hospital (Campbell et al., 2008). At birth, all children and mothers who granted informed consent were randomly assigned to a treatment group or a control group. Both groups were provided with adequate nutrition in the form of free, unlimited supplies of formula, social services for the family as needed, and free or reduced-cost medical care through the child’s first five years of life. Children in the treatment group received preschool services with a program and curriculum in a specially created early childhood center by the time they were six months of age. The program was five days per week, 8-10 hours per day for fifty weeks. School age students who received ABC preschool treatment performed significantly higher at every age tested (Ramey & Ramey, 2006). Children in the study were followed into adulthood. Not only were treated children still performing better on intelligence and reading and math assessments, 47% of them also were engaged in skilled jobs in contrast to only 27% of the control group. Additional stages of this study will concentrate on the
educational attainments and economic circumstances of the participants. This study has provided rich data through many years.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study tracked 1,539 students within the same age cohort beginning in 1985-86 who attended or received services from the 20 Child-Parent Centers in kindergarten (Reynolds, 1999). This study found similar results, that early educational intervention for low-income children was associated with better educational and social outcomes up to age 20 years along with a higher graduation rate and lower rates of juvenile arrests (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001). These findings provided strong evidence that established programs administered through public schools can promote children's long-term success.

To address the limited scope and age span of the Chicago Longitudinal Study, an additional study was conducted with the same group of participants at age 26. The study focused on economic benefits and determined whether benefits differed between participants and age groups (Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, & Robertson, 2011). Results indicated preschool participants had significantly higher rates of high school completion and completed more years of education. Among K-12 outcomes in the study, preschool was associated with significantly lower rates of grade retention, special education placement, and juvenile arrest. The study findings supported large economic benefits in promoting child health and well-being while the preschool component indicated greater investments in high quality preschool education programs are warranted.

More recently, a national study utilized collected data over children’s first 2 years of school from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the kindergarten class of 1998-1999. Findings confirmed that children in preschool programs one year prior to school entry had better
reading and math skills (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004). Children in center-based preschool programs that attended more than 20 hours per week were compared to children in preschool programs that only attended an average of 20 hours per week or less like Head Start and other non-parental child care. Center-based programs included preschools, prekindergarten programs, nursery schools, and day care centers. Children in the center-based preschool programs were less likely to repeat kindergarten and their advantage from intervention preschool programs (e.g., Abecedarian, which provided several years of intensive and high-quality early childhood education to very disadvantaged children) persisted through the spring of first grade. Findings in the study indicated larger effects were obtained for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Children’s learning-related skills attained included self-regulation, social responsibility, social independence, and social cooperation skills. How these skills impact academic performance in early childhood programs has been studied. A study conducted in Greensboro, NC in the late 1980s and early 1990s where 538 children participated, examined the relationship of learning-related skills to academic achievement in math and reading at school entry and again three years later (McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006). The study indicated that early acquisition of learning-related skills and particularly social skills prior to school entry was beneficial toward academic achievement for the children who participated. This study added to a growing body of evidence finding that acquiring self-regulation and social competence early are important pieces in school readiness and continues on through sixth grade.

In a 2005 study, the University of Kansas Beach Center on Disability partnered with the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) to examine school readiness, childcare, and family quality of life. Preliminary findings indicated that children enrolled in a combination of
relative/home-based care and preschool/center-based care scored significantly higher in four academically-related areas on a school readiness measure than children in home-based care only. Children enrolled in a preschool program scored significantly higher on a school readiness measure of general knowledge compared to children in any other child care arrangement or in no care (Beach Center on Disability, 2013). The research literature clearly illustrates the benefits of early childhood education, yet politics are at play when it comes to creating and funding programs.

**Politics in Early Childhood Education**

The enigma of politics is embedded throughout the history of public education. Policies are created and distributed through federal, state, and then locally in public education in the realm of politics. ACF centralizes the process of politics in forming policies over the course of time through the scientific background and how the actors respond to internal and external shocks within the early childhood subsystem. Federal initiatives to make early childhood programs more broadly available have faced political resistance dating back to President Nixon. The Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, which provided voluntary access to early child care and education for all children nationwide, was vetoed by President Nixon after successfully passing through both the U.S. House and U.S. Senate (Cohen, 1996). This was followed by a shift in federal policy that allowed states to play a significant role in implementing early childhood education programs.

Federally, Head Start opened the door for qualified early interventions. States have scaled up kindergarten and prekindergarten programs based upon the positive effects of small scaled intensive prekindergarten programs like Head Start. Local politics are caught in the middle of knowing the positive effects of early interventions, private interests with early
interventions, and adequate funding, which in most states is partially financed. If quality prekindergarten programs are the aim of state policy makers, they are more likely to side on the routinized option of running prekindergarten through public schools (McCabe & Sipple, 2011). Quality prekindergarten programs had these characteristics: all teachers were certified, classes were smaller, and teachers were more experienced. Although public and private early childhood education has politically collided for funding, this may result in an improved system that capitalizes on the strengths of each (McCabe & Sipple, 2011).

North Carolina brought a unique vision of early childhood education reform plan to the forefront in 1993. A book outlining the history of North Carolina’s Smart Start early childhood initiative utilized qualitative studies to examine how politics impacted legislative reform efforts in early childhood (Patterson & Adkins, 2012). Smart Start legislation was enacted with strong Democratic majorities in both houses of the North Carolina General Assembly and Democratic Governor Jim Hunt. Smart Start implemented twelve pilot partnerships for children in the first year 1993-94. Legislative appropriations for Smart Start began in 1994 at $47 million increasing to $231 million in 2001. Legislation articulated the intended relationship between state and local partnerships with communities given the maximum flexibility in developing implementation plans to facilitate a redesign of early childhood service uniquely suited to different communities. As the program developed and legislative appropriations increased, policy makers expected to see immediate results. Innovation at the local levels became stifled due to increased political scrutiny, and therefore subject to strict government regulations (Patterson & Adkins, 2012). The authors contended that Smart Start’s initial vision was “tamed” through bureaucratic governmental involvement over time as Smart Start emerged in a contentious political environment between party affiliations.
Although party affiliation and conservative vs. liberal values are notable, ideology tends to be where the literature leads the reader when looking into early childhood politics and how this influences policy development. In a study seeking to make sense of why policy makers see different determinants of policy when examining different types of policy choices, specific coercive and visible policy tools were utilized (Rigby, 2007). Coercive tools were defined as the extent to which a tool restricts individual or group behavior and are not commonly found in early childhood except for the area of regulated childcare providers. Visible tools are commonly defined as the extent to which the resources devoted to a tool show up in the normal government budgeting and policy review process. Early childhood policy tools identified in the study were grants-in-aid to local school districts to provide preschool programs, vouchers or subsidies to low income working parents to subsidize their childcare expenses, tax expenditure to refund a portion of families’ childcare costs, and regulation of the provision of public and private childcare in the state. Visibility of these four areas was quite different among states with economic and party affiliated distinctions, whether they were considered a Republican or Democratic state. The findings provide an empirical test that economic conditions constrain the use of more visible policy tools and political characteristics constrain the use of coercive tools. An additional finding of the study was increased representation by female legislators was most clearly linked to increased strictness of childcare regulation in states that were poorer and more conservative (Rigby, 2007). The focus of the study was to provide concepts that can help develop a more cohesive and coherent understanding of how politics impact policymaking.

Party affiliations are how states are generally characterized during election cycles and gain attention during policy development of high political interest. A recent study looked at quantitative data over thirty years (1980-2010) to bring a better understanding of how party
affiliation and party control of the elected legislative body influenced policies relevant to income (Rigby, 2012). The study examined state level patterns of partisanship and policy redistribution to determine whether the poor are rewarded with more favorable policy or whether states where those with low incomes would fare better in terms of redistributive policy in a cross-class political system. The study indicated consequences of the rise in income-stratified political parties in the United States are changing the platform during policy development. The quantified data has other factors contributing to the findings including minorities. The data brings important information toward a broader understanding of policy development and trends in how elected officials approach income stratified lines with constituents while advancing policy. This study brings background literature to political discussions in those states with grant-in-aids, vouchers, or subsidies in early childhood.

A state-level study including Georgia, Illinois, New York, South Carolina, and Texas examined how states managed the shift in education policy to add prekindergarten and the difficulty of instituting change in bureaucratic systems. Interviews were conducted with knowledgeable people in the field including Head Start personnel, childcare providers, people in the political scene, and others who were seen as relevant to the education policy in that particular state to determine the extent to which politics influenced how policy was established and then implemented. Interviews were coded into nine separate categories based upon previous work on policy barriers. Categories included instructional, individual, groups, economic, geographic, political, academic, media, and resources (Gallagher, Clayton, & Heinemeier, 2001). Each category was capable of being a facilitator or a barrier to establishing and implementing policy. All facilitators and barriers were coded by three judges for common themes and differences, whereby two of the three judges had to agree before the data was utilized. Within the coded
categories, common themes in the findings included the importance of political leadership, the goal to reduce school failure in early education years, making prekindergarten a piece of the larger educational reform package, the cooperation between professional and political leaders, and the increase in mothers in the workforce putting pressure on decision makers. Political leadership influenced policy development in states where the governor took leadership roles. Political leaders gained support in this study as they influenced and utilized policy learning as it related to early childhood education policy.

Differences between the states found in the study included the manner in which the programs were financed, gradual versus sudden implementation, how the programs were administered, and the amount of support services provided (Gallagher et al., 2001). The manner of financing early childhood education programs was rooted in the politics of each state. The administration of the program and support services related to the capacity of each state to handle or fund the areas required to implement an early childhood program. In one of the states, South Carolina legislative concerns revealed moral issues from conservative voices stating such early childhood education programs were undermining the family by encouraging women to work outside the home (Gallagher et al., 2001).

Early childhood educators want to see their students successful in future years in school; they are concerned about too strong of a push by policymakers to promote educational practices that undermine children’s enthusiasm for learning and the school experience. A study in Texas examined the effects of funding policies on student, family, teacher, community, and the early education programs and how funding policies affected the readiness equation (Brown, 2010). The study looked at students who qualified for funding and were deemed at-risk if they met specific criteria outlined in policies using an instrument developed by a task force to inform the
district’s pre-k teachers how to assess and score student performance. The instrument in this case study investigated the work of a collection of prekindergarten stakeholders (children, their families, and their teachers) that defined and aligned the academic performance expectations for their students with those found in the standards-based K-12 school district in which they worked. Conclusions of the study framed the readiness definition with a balance of accountability through standards-based education to a system of purpose and practice contracted with children, their families, and their teachers to guide the program. Through the findings of the study, Brown (2010) recommended policy development to continue promoting standards-based early education reforms that assists early education advocates and educators. Brown (2010) called for developing strategies to assist policy-makers and administrators in understanding the need for expanding the readiness equation so that it respects as well as improves the performance of all those involved in the early education process.

Advocacy Groups

Advocacy groups have become more involved over the years during the policy development process and play an active role in ACF with this study. Advocacy groups (also known as pressure groups, lobby groups, campaign groups, interest groups, or special interest groups) use various forms of advocacy to influence public opinion and/or policy. They have played and continue to play an important part in the development of political and social systems. These groups aggregate individual interests and preferences into collective demands and seek to influence the form and content of public policy (Allern & Bale, 2012). Motives for action may be based on a shared political, faith, moral, or commercial position. Advocacy groups use varied methods to achieve their goals including lobbying, media campaigns, polls, research, and policy
briefings. Some advocacy groups are supported by influential business or political interests and
exert influence on the political process, while others have insufficient funds.

Advocacy groups attempt to promote their positions in the policymaking process. The level of advocacy groups in the policy making process varies as does the degree of contestation, the number of allies and opponents, the degree of governmental support that a group enjoys, and other factors of theoretical interest (Mahoney & Baumgartner, 2008). A study analyzing lobbying success of 149 advocates on 47 issues revealed whether advocates did or did not attain their advocacy goals was driven much more by issue context than by institutional differences. Issue context is critical and plays a large role in lobbying success. (Mahoney, 2007). One of the conclusions of the findings tied to ACF is the coupling of direct elections with private funding of elections in the U.S., which leads to a system with incentives for elected officials to be more responsive to wealthier actors, thus influencing policy decisions. Hiring a professional lobbyist or joining an ad hoc issue coalition had no effect at all with study participants. Understanding where the majority of government support lies may be very important in understanding when lobbyists succeed and when they fail (Mahoney, 2007).

Established policy brings a different approach for advocacy groups. Lobbying by advocacy groups is about changing public policy, not establishing it from scratch (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Leech, & Kimball, 2009). Developing policy or changing public policy, each has a knowledgeable professional community surrounding it. Federal and state advocacy influence varied depending on the complexity of policies.

Social media has increased advocacy groups’ ability to promote civic engagement. Advocacy goes beyond the notion of advocating for, championing, or supporting a specific viewpoint or cause. Advocacy suggests systematic effort by specific actors who aim to further or
achieve specific policy goals and motivated primarily by principled beliefs (Prakash & Gugerty, 2010). In a study in which 125 advocacy groups participated, almost all of the groups revealed that social media were effective tools for facilitating civic engagement and collective action using outreach teams (Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012). Social media was utilized to interact with citizens with 98% of them having used Facebook to communicate.

The decentralization of preschool education in the United States gives tremendous discretion to state policy makers. They can choose to operate or not operate publicly funded preschool programs. The longstanding debate over public funding versus private funding and the governmental role in this policy debate has divided the constituency. In a quantitative analysis of contemporary preschool education across all 50 states, findings bring attention to advocacy and interest groups (Karch, 2010). Interest group politics within early childhood policy communities are influential. Communities with strong Head Start programs have a positive and significant effect on the likelihood that a state will not allocate public funds to preschool. The presence of unified Democratic government in a state also appears to increase the likelihood that it will fund preschool education. The authors concluded their analysis suggests that interest group politics affect both the decision to fund preschool education and the decision to operate a free-standing preschool program. These decisions reflect a division within the early education policy community with Head Start playing an important role. Officials who wish to alter the status quo will have to overcome the opposition of constituencies who benefit from existing policy arrangements and the political power of program beneficiaries can limit the options that policymakers possess (Karch, 2010).

National level advocacy groups are challenging to study as they yield groups with different goals and resources compared to the state level. In a study of 50 advocacy groups from
40 states in 2003, groups were asked to identify their top three issues that year (Gormley & Cymrot, 2006). Questions were targeted around issue framing, strategies to influence public officials, strategies to influence citizens or voters, and coalition partners. A follow up survey was completed by each group’s executive director in 2004 focusing on the allocation of time and effort between insider and outsider strategies, the frequency of use of particular strategies, coalition activity, mass media coverage, public policy research, and funding sources, for calendar year 2003. Findings from the study concluded child advocacy groups are more likely to invest in insider strategies if they perceive a larger number of opponents in their political environment. Outsider strategies are more common when the numbers of the opponents are higher on a specific piece of legislation. Child advocacy groups are more likely to join a coalition with a business group, a religious group, or another nonprofit organization if a large number of opponents are perceived in their political environment. Child advocacy groups are less likely to issue public policy reports in states where Republicans control a larger percentage of the seats in the state House of Representatives. The presence of a Republican governor discourages a commitment to public policy research with interest groups. Coalition building was more shaped by threats (the possible loss of some valued good) than by opportunities (the possible gain of some valued good) and initiatives (Gormley & Cymrot, 2006). Threats pose a sense of loss to advocacy coalitions such as a cutback in the number of grant-in-aids from the previous year. Avoiding a loss will be a high priority for most individuals and coalition groups. Case studies have suggested that child advocacy groups can score impressive victories when they reach out to Republican politicians (Gormley & Cymrot, 2006).

Advocacy groups may or may not impact policy development to fund early childhood programs in Kansas. As most advocacy groups are privately funded, these groups may come and
go or only operate when interest groups provide the necessary funds to generate interest and discussions with policy makers. Advocacy groups can also play positive roles in research studies to advance early childhood programs.

**State Policies in Early Childhood Education**

How policies are developed and implemented are essential elements to the Advocacy Coalition Framework. State policies effecting early childhood education programs will be examined in this section. The diversity and directions of state pre-kindergarten programs vary amongst states. Public schools are expanding their services to children less than 5 years of age, with most states currently offering some form of pre-kindergarten program, piloting programs, or discussing some possibility toward adding services. Eligibility in states ranges from targeting particular populations to universal preschool for all. Targeted preschool is most commonly associated with factors such as poverty, children’s skill level, children of immigrants who enter school with limited English language, or other risk factors determined by the state or locally. Universal preschool can either be statewide or within districts that choose to offer pre-kindergarten. Universal pre-kindergarten is offered to all children regardless of family’s income or additional criteria. In a study examining these differences among the 50 states, 125 respondents were interviewed in 2000-2001 with the state education agency being the primary contact (Bryant et al., 2002). Questions targeted each kind of state funded school-related program serving 3 and 4 year old children. In 2001-2002, 34 states and the District of Columbia operated a state-funded pre-kindergarten program with 16 states reporting no state funded pre-kindergarten programs. The majority of the programs (79%) were targeted and focused on children identified as at-risk for learning problems, although “at-risk” was defined differently across several states. The most common targeted criterion was the socioeconomic status of the
family. Georgia, New York, and Oklahoma had policy for universal eligibility for pre-kindergarten; these states will be discussed below in more detail. The study documented the variability across states in the way in which pre-kindergarten education is being implemented. Survey data indicated that states were still searching for the best design for operating pre-kindergarten programs and developing quality capacities for such (Bryant et al., 2002).

The National Institute for Early Education Research rates state pre-K programs according to 10 quality standards: comprehensive early learning standards, teacher with a Bachelor’s degree, specialized training in pre-K, assistant teacher with a Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent, at least 15 hours per year in-service, class size of 20 or lower, staff-child ratio of 1 to 10 or better, vision-hearing-health and one support service, at least one meal, and site visits (Barnett et al., 2012). In 2011-12, five states met all ten standards, seven states made nine out of ten standards, nine states met eight standards, seven states met seven standards, seven states met six standards, two met four standards, two met three standards, and one met two standards. Likewise, ten states did not serve three and four year old children at all during the 2011-12 school year. Kansas in that same school year met seven of these standards, which were comprehensive early learning standards, teachers with a bachelor’s degree, assistant teacher with a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or equivalent, at least 15 hours per year of teacher in-service, class size of 20 or lower, staff-child ratio 1:10 or better, and screening of vision, hearing, health; and at least one support service. Out of the fifty states reporting, 16.1% of three and four year old children were enrolled in state prekindergarten programs during the 2011-12 school year. Kansas reported 10.4% of three and four year olds enrolled during the 2011-12 school year (Barnett et al., 2012).
As noted above, Georgia, New York, and Oklahoma had established universal preschool programs in the late 1990s (Bryant et al., 2002). In recent years, more states have committed to serving all children at age 4. Florida, Illinois, Iowa, and West Virginia have programs that are designed to serve all 4-year-olds now or at some time in the future (Barnett, Friedman, Hustedt, & Stevenson Boyd, 2009). Four states currently have universal early childhood programs: Georgia, Oklahoma, Florida, and New York. The effects of such state policies on the equitable delivery of services will be reviewed.

In 1995, Georgia became the first state in the U.S. to make available early childhood education for all four-year olds. Georgia’s Pre-K program was caught in a political crossfire on how to fund the program. During his 1990 gubernatorial campaign, then Lieutenant Governor Zell Miller proposed using state lottery money to fund the program. Anti-lottery coalitions formed to fight against the lottery amendment. Governor Miller formed his own pro-lottery coalition, Georgians for Better Education, which was supported by powerful business interests. In November 1992, the constitutional amendment to establish a state lottery passed narrowly with 52% of the vote. The first year of the program, during 1993-94 school year, 8,700 low-income students attended lottery funded Pre-K. Following his reelection, Governor Zell Miller announced that Pre-K income eligibility requirements would be dropped. All Georgia four-year-olds were then eligible to attend a universal and voluntary program. Georgia’s Pre-K program served 60,000 students during the 1997-98 school year (Raden, 1999). In a 2001-04 study evaluating the effectiveness Georgia’s early childhood policy, 126 sites, including Georgia public Pre-K, private pre-schools, and Head Start programs participated (Henry et al., 2005). Significant findings associated with the study included children in Georgia made significant gains from the beginning of preschool to the end of first grade in terms of their skills compared
to national samples of children their age. According to the study’s findings, Georgia’s early education policy had successful results and became a desired direction for other states to follow.

In 1997, universal Pre-kindergarten was initiated in New York State with the hopes of offering improved pre-school experiences for the state’s 4-year-olds. In a statewide study, rural and non-rural settings offered the same preschool program types; however the distribution varied (Sipple, McCabe, & Ross-Bernstein, 2008). This difference in education capacity was especially noticeable when comparing state-funded pre-kindergarten in urban and rural areas. Such programming is significantly more likely in high need urban/suburban districts when compared with their low-income rural counterparts. This study offered considerable evidence of variation in the patterns and effects of early childhood education between rural and non-rural settings that are common in rural areas. Available education capacity was a finding directly affecting rural communities. Rural areas have fewer delivery options than non-rural areas in states with policies affecting early childhood programs.

New York’s universal prekindergarten program funding was jeopardized due to setbacks in the state economy during the 2001 recession. In response to this threat, an emergency coalition to save universal pre-K was organized and reduced class size was initiated. The pre-K administrators association was especially engaged in the coalition, gathering signatures on petitions, sending children’s artwork to legislators and mobilizing local constituents. Educational administrators displayed their immersion in their broader institutional community when they relied on their professional peers (Casto & Sipple, 2011). The education community, advocates, concerned parents and citizens were energized and worked hard to restore education cuts, culminating in a major rally called by a broad coalition of education groups, including the emergency coalition, in early May 2003. The Governor vetoed the funding for the universal pre-
K in the proposed budget. In a nearly unprecedented action, the Legislature overrode the veto
and for 2003-2004, universal pre-K was funded at $204 million in New York (Mitchell, 2004).

Oklahoma established its universal pre-K program in 1998 with legislation and
accompanying regulations allowing all public schools districts to participate and deliver pre-K
services to students. Oklahoma made a commitment to provide high quality early education
through establishing policies that required highly qualified teachers and pay consistent with all
elementary teachers, pay above the state average for childcare providers, and a relatively strict
student to teacher ratio of 10 to 1. In a study examining the effects of Oklahoma’s pre-K
program, children who were exposed to the pre-K program displayed increases in
cognitive/knowledge scores, increases in language scores, and increases in motor skills. Testing
started upon enrollment for pre-K and kindergarten students with follow up one year after
enrollment. Positive effects of pre-K on language and cognitive skills accounted for most of the
overall effects (Gormley & Gayer, 2005). The Tulsa, Oklahoma pre-K program has generated
improvements in school readiness. Looking at students as a whole, kindergarten students who
attended the Tulsa pre-K program are 9 months ahead of their peers in reading, 7 months ahead
in writing, and 5 months ahead in math (Gormley, 2013).

In 2002 Florida voters approved (with 58.6% of the vote) a ballot initiative to change
Florida’s Constitution to require that high quality Prekindergarten be made available on a
voluntary basis to all four-year-old children in the state by September 2005 (Early Learning
Coalition of Miami/Dade/Monroe, 2013). In 2004 the Florida legislature passed what was
considered by many to be a fundamentally flawed bill that did not include provisions to phase in
certified teachers with college degrees, an acceptable teacher-child ratio, or a strong curriculum
to guide what children were to learn, which Governor Jeb Bush vetoed, therefore a special
session of the legislature was called. In 2005, Florida’s Voluntary Prekindergarten program was started in response to the constitutional amendment that required the state to make pre-K available to all children at age 4. After three years, more than 145,000 children had enrolled, representing 67% of Florida’s 4-year-olds (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011). Although Florida offers an extremely large pre-K program, it is not well funded. Per-child spending in Florida ranks among the lowest in the country, and program staffing standards are very low (Barnett et al., 2010). The state provides only a minimal student allocation for every child projected to enroll in pre-K. In 2009, base student allocations for Florida’s program were reduced, and staff-child ratios were increased. While using a low-base student allocation, children were essentially served in existing child care programs with little or no increase in quality thus reducing the educational effectiveness of the program.

In all states, rural communities along with at-risk populations are challenged with adequate opportunities for early childhood-education. Inequities regarding those opportunities are present and tied to effective policies or lack of them. Families and policy makers have become more aware of the importance of high-quality early childhood education opportunities and the cost of child care has skyrocketed (Giannarelli, 2000). Opportunities for children often depend upon location of services and the costs of delivering those services. Wright (2011) found inequities when analyzing studies where he drew on a critical theoretical perspective to examine the influence of social structures undergirding the universal preschool debate. A disparity in access regarding what qualifies as preschool education further complicates an analysis of access and quality. A lack of consensus regarding what constitutes high-quality care and regulables (capacities) including student-teacher ratios, class sizes, space requirements, teacher education, and various aspects of the classroom environment are examples of where disparities in quality
occur. In order for universal preschool policies to achieve their promise and overcome these disparities, new structures and social commitments are necessary, which would allow for the emergence of early childhood classrooms for families of various income levels (Wright, 2011).

**Funding Early Childhood Education Programs**

Funding policies directly affect the availability of resources for early childhood programs. This section explores studies directed at funding early childhood education. The ACF correlates this process with actors within the early childhood education subsystem and how funding streams are influenced. Internal and external shocks within the process of ACF will be examined through funding studies in early childhood education. Funding early childhood programs is complex because state and local policy makers balance competing interests when making choices about prioritizing funding possibilities.

A national study examining the financing of early childhood programs (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011) explored the different funding streams and the funding formulas commonly used by different states. Oklahoma, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Vermont, and Maine utilize funding formulas tied to student enrollment or student populations. Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee utilized lottery resources to fund early childhood programs. Florida and New York had legislative approval for universal early childhood but did not have a dedicated funding stream for pre-K, leaving it subject to shifting political priorities in each budget year. Arkansas enacted a sin tax to fund early childhood (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011). Financing mechanisms are quite different and poorly coordinated across the states regarding federal, state, or local funds utilized. Approaches to the delivery of early childhood services therefore varies between states and between the state and local levels (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011). These inconsistencies have resulted in patchworks of preschool policies and finance mechanisms at the federal, state, and
local levels. Early childhood funding models that work well in one environment may be less successful in another due to the make-up of the clientele and/or the variation in the political climate.

Since no corresponding national estimates on funding exists for state pre-K programs, policy analysts who want to compare the cost effectiveness of state programs and Head Start cannot do so. A study examining the cost effectiveness of pre-K programs in five states (Michigan, New Jersey, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Oklahoma) revealed differences in funding amounts (Wong, Cook, Barnett, & Jung, 2008). The study looked at the relationship between total state funding levels and the magnitude of results with regard to the effectiveness of cognitive gains. States differed in the delivery of universal pre-K programs along with the amount of dollars spent per student. The average amount each state spent on pre-K per child ranged from $3,219 in South Carolina to $10,361 in New Jersey. The sampled states were noted to be quite diverse with respect to program duration, funding levels, and eligibility requirements for enrollment. Although diverse, these states also have high quality standards in terms of paying teachers on public school salary scales and requiring pre-K teachers to have Bachelor’s degrees.

State early childhood funding policies may collide with private funded programs in rural areas. Private programs including childcare options were threatened when the number of four year old children enrolled dropped due to parents electing to send their children to the free public prekindergarten program offered through the public school (Morrissey, Lekies, & Cochran, 2007). This mixed method study analysis noted decreases in 4-year-old and total enrollment of community based organizations, increased teacher recruitment difficulty, and competition for teachers impacted the two sectors competing for enrollment. Both private and public school
interests display a value in early childhood development program; both have stakes in
developing early childhood funding policy.

**Developing Capacity in Early Childhood**

Developing capacity in early childhood education is about who, how, and where
decisions are made, management takes place, services are delivered, and results are monitored
and evaluated. Early childhood capacity links components essential for quality education
programs, including quality teachers, administrators, facilities, curriculum, and communication.
Administrators are challenged with recruiting and retaining qualified personnel, and securing
funding for early childhood programs. An administrator is responsible for communicating and
keeping early childhood curriculum visible regardless of the size, perceived priority, or
complexity. For the proposed study, superintendents of rural schools or their administrative
designee are key actors within ACF. Early childhood programs tend to go under the radar in
many rural districts. The numbers of students in rural early childhood programs are relatively
small compared to organizations with multiple academic disciplines and extracurricular areas.
Organizations with capacities in staffing and facilities have greater opportunities to provide
services. Increased participation requires higher number of teachers to assist in various academic
opportunities. The effect of school district size on the offering of prekindergarten programs,
rural school districts serving poorer populations of students who have less space per student are
less likely to offer state funded pre-kindergarten (Sipple et al., 2007).

Administrative support is critical for developing, implementing, and communicating the
needs for an effective program (Aubrey, Godfrey, & Harris, 2013). Administrators are respected
leaders who were able to communicate the positive and necessary benefits a successful early
childhood program had on the academic path of students. Connecting with policy makers,
parents, and board members is essential for administrators to present accurate information. The financial stability of a program is dependent upon administrative support, as most programs are not self-funded. In a study in North Carolina, 48 superintendents expressed value for early childhood program initiatives for young children, and acknowledged how the lack of early childhood would adversely impact students entering kindergarten (Stover, 2013). Findings from the study indicated a high frustration level of the superintendents regarding how to create Pre-K programs due to continuing dwindling of funding sources for school systems.

Administrators of rural schools face unique challenges with offering and funding early childhood education associated with geographic isolation, socioeconomic challenges, the level of student diversity among rural students, and limited school and community resources (J. Johnson & Strange, 2007). Geographic isolation relates to the increasing number of rural communities with 2,500 or less population. Socioeconomic challenges including the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals or the adult unemployment rate, present the most persistent threats to high levels of student achievement in rural areas. Student diversity among rural students indicates both a challenge and an opportunity for a state to contribute to closing the many national achievement gaps. With community resources tied to capacity parameters in general, rural teachers are paid less than teachers in other locales, Prairie/Plains states with low to moderate levels of rural poverty had mostly above average fiscal capacity, yet these areas were relatively low spenders in their rural schools (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012).

Early childhood program administrators are expected to secure qualified teachers licensed in early childhood education. Prekindergarten children benefit more when they have teachers with more education, credentials, and professional development (Saracho & Spodek, 2007). Large benefits occur only when teachers are professionally prepared and adequately
compensated (Barnett, 2004). Highly qualified teachers require adequate compensation to retain their services. In a study in Georgia, researchers found that teachers who had greater experience teaching pre-k had classrooms with a higher global quality score on the Early Childhood Education Resources Guide (ECERS) (Peisner-Feinberg, Schaaf, & LaForett, 2013). Global quality included components of environment and physical space of settings for children, curriculum content and pedagogy, early childhood educators and caregivers, partnership with families and communities, services for young children with special needs, accountability, supervision, and management of programs (Association for Childhood Education International, 2013). Recommendations to improve quality included enhancing children’s acquisition of skills, reducing class size, adding bilingual supports during children’s classroom experiences, increasing staff-child interactions, increasing interactions among children, providing for parents, increasing staff interaction, improving staff supervision, ensuring lead teacher certification, and increasing lead teacher years of experience teaching pre-kindergarten.

Teachers’ education degree/major and classroom quality as well as children’s academic skills in the year before kindergarten entry is of collective importance to teacher quality and highly qualified teachers in early childhood education. In a meta-analysis, seven major studies of large data sets with similarly defined variables were used to predict classroom quality and children’s academic outcomes from the educational attainment and majors of teachers of four year olds (Early et al., 2007). The findings indicated a prekindergarten teacher’s education remains important because the Bachelor’s degree is the established entry point into the teaching profession within a public school setting. Establishing a bachelor’s degree as a minimum requirement separates public school requirements from private program requirements. Policies that increase the educational attainment of preschool teachers were presumed likely to lead to
increased classroom quality or children’s academic gains. The study’s data indicated that such policies alone are unlikely to have such effects. Instead, teachers’ education must be considered as part of a system of factors that contribute to teacher quality, which in turn is related to classroom quality and children’s gains. The findings should not be interpreted as an indictment of the role of teacher education level in high-quality programs for 4-year-olds. A comprehensive professional development system for mentoring and in-service teachers could provide the knowledge, skills, and supports for teachers to provide a high-quality early education experience that can positively impact children’s development (Early et al., 2007).

Many rural school administrators experience difficulties attracting and retaining preschool teachers for a variety of reasons, including lower salaries and benefits (Hannum, Irvin, Banks, & Farmer, 2009). Highly qualified teachers influence academic progress and can be difficult to secure in rural areas. Recruiting and hiring highly qualified teachers for early childhood, however, can be a challenge in rural areas where hiring and securing teachers for all education disciplines is not always possible. In a study examining personnel needs of rural areas, some experienced a crisis of too few teachers and related personnel and quality in sufficiently prepared professionals (Rosenkoetter, Irwin, & Saceda, 2004). The study found that special rural knowledge and skills might be required for early interventionists to be satisfied and productive in rural areas, thus sustaining employment. Findings suggested knowledge and skills were needed in rural special education, rural community building, and collaboration including leadership in systems change and needs assessments, strategies for coping with professional isolation, identifying and accessing resources, issues of culture and language, supporting families in sparsely populated areas, utilizing educational technology to include distance learning, rural socioeconomic and political realities to include rural poverty, and completing internships in rural
areas. Although some suggestions that targeted training strategies and particular recruitment methods might be beneficial in developing and maintaining teachers in rural areas, the authors utilized rural skills and knowledge that motivated and influenced the study.

State policy requiring specific preschool curriculum requires adequate funding. Quality curriculum delivered by a highly qualified teacher can greatly affect an early childhood program. Researchers have suggested qualitative elements of the preschool curriculum have the greatest impact on students, including learning environment and quality of instruction (Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott–Shim, 2001). Policies that direct specific curriculum without proper funding to pay for the required elements created barriers including retaining qualified teachers, providing appropriate educational facilities, and purchasing appropriate supplies and curriculum.
CHAPTER 3
Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative research was a suitable methodology for this study because it sought to understand stakeholders’ perceptions of early childhood policymaking and the implications these policies have created for state funding early childhood education in rural communities. This study used qualitative research methods to answer questions about early childhood education policies, interest groups, funding sustainability, challenges, and successes. Researchers who utilize qualitative methods are interested in interpretations of reality in particular contexts at a given point in time (Merriam, 2002) or how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 1998). Through multiple sources of data, the beliefs and viewpoints of people emerge.

The research design of this study, investigative procedures, and the methodology for data collection are discussed in this chapter. I will discuss how participant samples were selected, how data were collected and analyzed, and how the trustworthiness of the study was ensured (Merriam, 2009). This chapter details the methodology used to examine perceptions about state-funded early childhood education programs and the political context of state legislative policy affecting program development and sustainability (Weible et al., 2009). Findings were interpreted through the Advocacy Coalition Framework.

Research Participants

Participants of this study included a sample of 26 elected officials in the Kansas House of Representatives, Kansas Senate, Kansas State Board of Education, rural district superintendents, and representatives of state early childhood advocacy groups. The participants were purposefully selected because they had knowledge of the problem examined and allowed the
researcher to discover an understanding of the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2012). This was accomplished by dividing Kansas into four quadrants and identifying elected officials representing rural communities selected from each quadrant. Rural area participants had differing views and experiences on some issues due to their geographical location within the state. A unique and network sampling was necessary to ensure there was representation from rural areas in each quadrant of Kansas (Merriam, 2009).

My plan was to invite approximately 20-30 individuals from these groups to participate in the study. I initially planned to interview a minimum of one House of Representatives and Senator from each quadrant and continue interviews as needed to collect adequate data. I interviewed a total of seven House of Representatives members and six Senators. I planned to interview a minimum of one State Board of Education member and one superintendent from each of the quadrants and to continue interviewing as needed to collect sufficient data. I interviewed four State Board of Education members and five superintendents. I had planned to interview at least two representatives of advocacy groups and interviewed four advocacy group representatives across the state.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

I attended a superintendent forum at the Southeast Kansas Education Center at Greenbush in Topeka, the annual KSDE conference at Wichita, and utilized recommendations from elected officials during the study that assisted in identifying additional elected officials to interview. I requested assistance from Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) personnel to identify districts with current early childhood programs and those that were not participating in the KSDE program. Through this process, I identified elected officials that represented rural communities with early childhood education services and communities that did not provide early childhood
services in this study. Rural districts in southwest Kansas participated in a cooperative consortium regionally located to share expenditures so specific early childhood programs could be offered in some areas. I attended the KSDE annual conference to invite superintendent participation to the study. Invitations of elected policymakers, advocacy representatives, and superintendents were made by phone or in person.

I utilized the Kansas State Department of Education, State Board of Education (SBOE) members, a dissertation team member, and advocacy groups that assisted in the identification of active early childhood education advocacy groups in Kansas. These recommendations were to include both supporting and adversarial advocacy groups in Kansas regarding early childhood education. Advocacy groups and their respected offices were found around urban areas. I sought elected political party members from Democratic and Republican that gained important perspectives towards policy development along party lines. Rural Kansas was largely Republican; therefore finding an elected Democrat to participate in the study was challenging, especially in rural communities.

I sought rural Kansas superintendents to participate from districts with established KSDE early childhood programs and from districts that did not have a KSDE approved four year old early childhood program. Two superintendent participants were purposefully selected because they were currently in a rural district and had recently departed from another rural school district over the past school year. This allowed additional perspectives from both participants in rural school districts. Additional interviews were dependent upon themes emerging from the data in this study. In qualitative research, the researcher can purposefully select the study participants and site locations because they can help support and guide the study (Merriam, 2009). Established participant interviews in each quadrant directly reflected the purpose of the study.
and complimented the research questions in order to provide rich and relevant information (Merriam, 2009).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I traveled to the home districts of rural elected participants along with utilizing their respective offices in Topeka for the interviews. This included traveling to areas in Kansas where the elected officials resided. This setting allowed for a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere for participants. Traveling to the participant’s home district also allowed for a better understanding of the experiences revealed during interviews, specifically if facilities were mentioned for early childhood opportunities. This strategy allowed for additional descriptors or themes to emerge in the study, as I had an opportunity to view or visit the facilities and to see the distance between communities and schools. I traveled to the offices of each early childhood advocacy group representatives for the interviews. Three superintendent interviews were conducted on a conference phone call and recorded and two superintendents were interviewed at the KSDE annual conference in Wichita.

My research included 25-60 minute guided interviews with 26 elected officials, superintendents, leaders of early childhood advocacy groups, and analysis of relevant documents. Elected officials, advocacy groups, and superintendents were asked a similar set of questions but not necessarily in the same order. I used open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews to guide conversation between the interviewers and the participants (Merriam, 2009). Interviewing was conducted as a purposeful conversation so participants could tell their stories in their own words (Erlandson, Skipper, Allen, & Harris, 1993). Probing questions were utilized to follow up and clarify an area already covered (Merriam, 2009). I recorded specific responses
from the interviews and also documented unexpected concerns that surfaced during the conversation (Patton, 2001). Interview questions are included in Appendix A.

Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded in order to identify themes and findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The qualitative data collected from interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings. Listening to the audio recording and transcribing was the beginning of the data analysis process. Next, I unitized the data, by sorting information into segments containing single ideas (Auer-Srnka & Koeszegi, 2007). Each transcript was reviewed several times to search for patterns in the data. The constant comparative method was used to expedite a strong fit between data and codes as this process compares data with data, data with codes, and codes with codes to find similarities and differences (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012). Codes were consistently compared with new data. During the next level of analysis, the data were sorted into categories using the research questions as a guide for developing initial codes and creating other codes from new information and themes that emerged from subsequent data. The last step used axial coding, where I looked for relationships across the codes and worked back and forth between the theoretical framework, codes, and data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Document Review

I reviewed documents pertaining to Kansas State legislative policy which was studied to provide background and contextual information (Merriam, 1998). This included current funding policies for early childhood education. KSDE documents were reviewed for relevant and up to date information on policies and funding available to Kansas school districts. Document reviews included a wide range of written material relevant to this study (Merriam, 2009). Examples included existing policies/procedures, new program applications, websites, qualifications criteria
for early childhood programs and student entry, grants available, and capacity requirements for early childhood programs. KSDE was asked to provide data relevant to students who qualify for early childhood opportunities, districts participating, active advocacy groups, and current funding allotments in Kansas. Documents were examined to see how they align with what participants said and the data collected (Merriam, 2009).

**Research Quality**

I used several techniques to enhance the research validity and reliability of the study. These techniques included triangulation of data (interviews, observations, and documents), checking interpretations with individuals interviewed, on-site interviews in rural locations, asking peers to comment on emerging findings, and clarifying my biases and assumptions. (Merriam, 2009). I had sustained involvement in my research settings throughout all four quadrants of my geographical scope to ensure an understanding of what is going on with rural early childhood education in Kansas (Lapan et al., 2012). A worthy topic that is relevant, timely, significant, and interesting to the reader brings a level of quality to a study (Tracy, 2010). I ensured the findings were grounded in the data and the results consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 1998). Data was collected until themes emerged and a point of redundancy was reached.

To increase credibility in the research findings, I used the technique of triangulation, which involved multiple data sources, and data collection methods to confirm findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I collected and analyzed the data and utilized multiple perspectives to synthesize the findings.

In addressing trustworthiness, the process of member checking was utilized to verify the data with the participants. Member checking is a technique that consists of continually testing
with informants the researcher's data (Krefting, 1991) and was utilized for follow up and accuracy of the data. Interview participants had an opportunity to review their transcript for accuracy. Most participants responded within the specified time limit but some participants chose not to respond and some indicated their appreciation to have this opportunity but did not respond when the transcript arrived. All transcripts were electronically sent to the email address provided by the participant or an email account in the legislative directory. All receipts were kept on record along with corrections requested by the participant. I produced a study that was conducted and disseminated in an ethical manner that demonstrate procedures following stated methodologies (Merriam, 2009). In addressing authenticity, I have provided a balanced and fair view of all the perspectives in the study (Lapan et al., 2012).

In summary of research quality; the analysis of interviews, documents, transcripts, the theoretical framework, and background literature guided this study. Research questions brought the telling of participants, events, and themes of the experiences shared within the early childhood education subsystem framework that strengthens this study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Qualitative research is intended to help the reader better understand the meanings and perspectives of the people in the study, how these perspectives are shaped by cultural contexts, and the specific processes that are involved in maintaining or altering these phenomena and relationships (Maxwell, 2013). Clear explanation of the theory (Lichtman, 2012) with proper critiques of empirical literature reviews are ethical responsibilities of the researcher. Qualitative educational researchers face complex ethical issues because their research involves their own personal experiences as well as those of their participants (Lapan et al., 2012). Research ethical standards involve issues such as the right to privacy, confidentiality, honesty, trust, harm and
risk, and informed consent (Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 2002). I secured the data including digital recordings in my office with a digital password protected site.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to any interviewing. Participants received and reviewed the consent form before the interview began and were made fully aware that all participation was voluntary and withdrawal could take place at any time during the process as outlined within the interview protocol located in Appendix A. Consent forms are included in Appendix B. Confidentiality and anonymity was protected and handled with extreme care. Comments utilized in writing the findings did not identify a participant (Merriam, 2009).

**Researcher Positionality**

Researchers need to be aware of how their subjectivity may be shaping their inquiry and its outcomes (Peshkin, 1988). By monitoring myself, I have created an informative, empowering personal statement where my research and experience were intertwined. I strived to be aware of the participants’ perceptions and sensitivity to my investigative procedures in addition to biases from my background experiences. Positionality describes the identities of the researcher in relation to the participants and data (Lapan et al., 2012).

Because of my experiences the past eight years as superintendent of a rural district with approximately 550 students, I have developed a level of interest in early childhood education. I have been an educator for a total of 27 years and have watched students from various backgrounds struggle or succeed in our education settings. I have worked in a private school followed by a large urban high school. I began my teaching career as a substitute teacher and coach in a rural area before moving to a mid-sized school district after two years teaching physical education and health. I spent sixteen years in this school district and my responsibilities
included being teacher, coach, athletic director, assistant principal, and principal. I have observed over the years that most students who demonstrated social and academic challenges in elementary school continue to struggle throughout their educational years. I believe that a strong foundation developed early in a child’s academic path facilitates a successful learning environment for children. I am married to an elementary teacher and we have three children ages twenty two, nineteen, and thirteen. Only one of our three children had preschool experience and excelled in schooling. The other two children did not have preschool experience and required additional academic assistance and school was more frustrating for them.

My experiences as a teacher, coach, building administrator, and now superintendent has reinforced my passion for educators and the awesome responsibility we have to children. Every child brings a unique opportunity every day. I embrace the belief as educators we have a new opportunity to connect with every child, every day. My experiences in the secondary levels reinforce the importance of the early years in education and how essential they are to all children. I believe that the years up through third grade are the foundational years for a child’s education. The quality and availability of opportunities for children in these years are where my passion has moved throughout my career.

Early childhood has an abundance of research success studies from brain research, curriculum programs, social implications, motor skills, and academic growth to name a few. My interests was to conduct a study in this area to learn and advance my knowledge in early childhood education, but to provide perspectives drawn from empirical research to possibly making a difference in early childhood funding for all Kansas children. My interests continue to improve my understanding in how the process of policy design occurs, and what influences affect the outcomes in the passing of policy for elected officials.
I recognize that I must be careful to not transfer my experiences and assumptions into this study. Regardless of my wide range of experiences, my heart belongs in small rural communities. Political assumptions are often sensed in observations of legislative action or lack thereof and I have attempted to keep my own biases from hindering my research. As a professional educator, I have a strong belief in teachers, administrators, and educational support staff. I believe in public education as I see daily positive results. I have a desire for increasing opportunities for students and staff. These acknowledged biases must be kept from influencing my analysis and negating the authenticity of my study. To minimize and keep my biases from influencing my study, I utilized independent peer debriefers to examine the data and confirm or question my information or results.
CHAPTER 4

Findings

Qualitative research design is emergent (Merriam, 2009). Data analysis begins at the point of collection and is ongoing through transcription, organization and report writing (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Data analysis is a part of the research process when the researcher considers what meaning can be derived from interview transcripts, field observations, review of documents, and audio recordings of interviews. This chapter presents from 26 individual interviews conducted with members of the House of Representatives, Senators, SBOE members, advocacy group representatives, superintendents, and documents obtained from the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE).

The findings are organized according to stakeholder groups (Merriam, 2009). The findings show how policymakers, advocacy groups, and superintendents identified the areas they believed were affecting and influencing early childhood education implementation in rural areas of Kansas. Finally, the similarities and differences in the perception of elected policymakers, advocacy groups, and superintendents across Kansas were examined. This study examined several levels of data to provide a deeper understanding of rural early childhood policy. The levels of data included the impact of early childhood education in rural school districts in Kansas, the perceptions of participant groups in the House of Representatives, Senators, SBOE members, advocacy groups, and superintendents about the need for early childhood education in rural areas, who or what was influencing their perceptions of early childhood issues, and how early childhood is financed.
House of Representatives

Seven members of the House of Representatives were interviewed in this study representing all rural geographical areas in Kansas. All of these members belonged to the Republican Party. Members of the Kansas House of Representatives are elected on a two-year term. The geographical size of their represented area is dependent upon the U.S. Census population report. Rural areas encompass more square miles than urban areas, which mean rural representatives cover several small communities in many of the legislative districts in Kansas.

Several themes were culled from the data regarding what these House of Representatives members think influences policy decisions about early childhood programs for 3-4 year olds in rural Kansas. Themes are listed from the highest frequent responses. These themes were their perceptions of the sources of early childhood policy information, lack of knowledge about early childhood, role of early childhood advocacy groups, community buy-in to early childhood, positive impact of early childhood initiatives, and critical factors in sustaining early childhood programs.

Sources of Early Childhood Policy Information

Participants identified numerous departments or individuals they sought out for information when making early childhood policy decisions. The most frequently mentioned trusted sources of information regarding early childhood education and policy issues were educational professionals, each other, their constituents, the legislative research department, and the Kansas State Department of Education.

Education professionals. Teachers, administrators, and other education professionals were cited as the primary and most reliable source of information for House of Representative members. One House member noted “I make sure that I pay attention to what our school
officials are asking for.” House members identified professionals in education who provided them with information about early childhood education; they especially valued the opinions of professional educators in rural areas. One House member spoke directly about educators in his rural community, stating “what influences me are teachers and friends of mine in the business.” One House member sought the opinions of his teacher friends working in elementary schools, stating, “I will talk to friends in the education industry” as he added “You talk to people you know and trust.” Yet another House member added, “I have looked to the different people that I know that are involved in education” to gather information in the early childhood field. Teachers working with younger children were viewed as especially important sources of early childhood policy information. For one House member ongoing conversations with a teacher provided him with information to use for developing a position on early childhood policy. He explained, “I’ve been visiting with her quite a bit on the education issues because I do respect her and she’s done a great job, well thought of in the community and she’s done it for years and years.” Another House member trusted one particular teacher that influenced him with regard to early childhood education, affirming, “On the preschool area, she’s been a real asset for me to gain an understanding.” These House members tended to go to education professionals working in the field with whom they had previously established a relationship and therefore trusted.

**Collegial expertise.** Elected officials also relied upon each other for expertise on education policy issues. A House member shared how he goes to House member colleagues that sit on the education committee for expert information about developing early childhood policies, noting, “Some of the other folks on the education committee have extensive education background.” Education committee members have the opportunity to listen to testimony from professionals and advocacy groups presenting on early childhood education proposals or topics
during committee hearings. Speaking about the importance of testimony, one member added he relied upon “The education I receive from my colleagues and different people that testify and give credibility to the issue.” House education committee members were viewed as “go to” people regarding up to date information while developing policies. According to another House member, “I typically look at the chairman of the education committee when I have specific questions about the policies. It’s a very broad spectrum when you talk about some of the issues with early childhood development.” Finding a trusted House member or staff person that could provide the information needed was valuable to some of the participants in order to collaborate on early childhood education policies. House members tended to draw more upon their beliefs and values about early childhood education than they did the scientific and technical information.

**Constituents.** Information obtained from parents and community members played a part with influencing early childhood policy development. One House member spoke about the need to “Talk to constituents.” This House member also shared how she ensured that the citizens she represented were heard and had the opportunity for input on early childhood policies, stating,

I try to hold regular town hall meetings to make sure that I understand what the prevailing opinion is of the people I represent. There will never be a total consensus, but I try and stay in close touch to the folks that I represent.

As registered voters and constituents in rural communities, parents of young children provided input to House members on education issues and policy. Parents not only have a vested interest in the education of their young children, but parents are generally some of the registered voters in many rural communities.

**Legislative Research Department.** The Legislative Research Department located in the capitol building is one of four nonpartisan agencies that provide support services for the Kansas
Legislature. The Department has provided nonpartisan, objective research and fiscal analysis for the Kansas Legislature since 1934 (Kansas Legislative Research Department, 2014). It provided research data and relevant information about early childhood policy and implications that might occur. Material prepared for individual legislators was confidential. The Department of Legislative Research was cited as a reliable source of information for House of Representative members. One House member said, “The primary place we go is the legislative research department” as “Those folks answer most of my questions.” The Legislative Research Department was readily available to House members and access to desired information was not problematic. A House member illustrated, “Legislative research is probably still going to be at the top of my list.” The legislative research department was believed to provide impartial data about policy development as analysts considered the possible effects of a policy for House members.

State education department. The Kansas State Board of Education (KSDE) was noted as another reliable source for information about early childhood education policy, but was mentioned less often than the other sources. To illustrate, one House Member stated, “I trust our liaisons with the Kansas Board.” Another House member identified one person in particular, Dale Dennis, who is a long time budget authority at KSDE, citing, “I use him quite a bit” as a source of information regarding the development of education policy. Research provided by KSDE was important and relevant to House members. One House member used research provided through KSDE that addressed early childhood interventions closing achievement gaps, noting, “There’s also research that suggests that there are some good opportunities to catch up when a child has missed some of those opportunities.” This veteran House member utilized
research to support policy implications that were necessary for consideration of a bill before it moved forward in the legislative process.

**Lack of Knowledge about Early Childhood**

The need to educate elected officials in rural communities about the importance of early childhood was an issue raised by several House members. Some House members admitted there was a lack of knowledge amongst elected policymakers about the importance of early childhood education and the status of early childhood programs in rural Kansas. House members that do not have young children or have not observed early childhood education programs may have limited information about the positive results and needs for such programs in rural areas. To further illustrate, a House member communicated the need to educate elected officials, stating, “Some of these legislators…unless they experienced it at home a lot, they probably don’t understand it.” Most House members were not aware of what early childhood programs were currently available in rural communities, including the communities where they resided. One House member admitted, “I assumed that all districts provided it.” Although the participant lacked awareness of available early childhood programs in his area, he did believe it should be offered. When asked about current programs in his area of representation, another House member confessed, “I honestly don’t know if there are” early childhood programs. Currently available early childhood programs were unknown by a House member from a different regional area, who indicated, “I really don’t know that there’s any other program; I’m not really aware of any” regarding early childhood programs in the communities he represents. Most House members were not aware that many rural communities did not provide services for four-year-old children.
Role of Early Childhood Advocacy Groups

In an attempt to examine the effects of advocacy groups working in Kansas, questions were targeted toward the role these groups had with decisions for early childhood education. Questions were asked regarding the influence early childhood advocacy groups had on policymakers in Kansas. House members related the importance of advocacy groups, and noted these groups had both positive and negative attributes.

**Positive attributes.** House members related important roles for early childhood advocacy groups and expressed appreciation about receiving information from them. House members recognized that early childhood wellbeing was the top priority of these advocacy groups. Early childhood advocates kept the issues in the spotlight and ensured, “there’s awareness on the part of legislators regarding the key aspects of a given policy,” according to a House member. The presence of early childhood advocacy groups was significant in the state capitol. A House member illustrated, “the advocacy groups are hired to be influencing decision making in the capitol,” subsequently “they do have a large input.”

House members acknowledged the expertise of advocacy groups and for the most part valued the information they provided. Advocates and House members interacted with each other in various ways. In some cases, House members sought out advocates when needing information on early childhood, as one stated, “With me, I seek them out.” When considering policy or the ramifications of a proposal in early childhood, another House member also sought information from advocacy groups. He shared, “Advocacy groups I look at as a source of information” when it came to policy consideration. In other cases, House members were sought out by advocates for specific input. In one example, a House member shared he appreciated being approached by an early childhood advocate to look over information specific to early childhood policy. The
advocate told the House member “I’ve got some statistics here” for the House member to look at because “we’re going to see some legislation.” The House member quoted an advocacy group member after he was recently approached and apprised him of a potential bill that the House member would be interested in. Some advocacy groups were more proactive than others with keeping House members informed on early childhood policy. To illustrate, a House member referred to an early childhood education lobbyist who visited his office “quite regularly and updates me.” Overall, most interviews revealed House members identified a positive and important role for advocacy groups when it came to early childhood education policy.

**Negative experiences.** Some negative comments were directed toward early childhood advocacy groups. A few advocates were seen as biased and lacking credibility. Information that gave insights to both the positive and negative effects of a proposed policy in early childhood was lacking in some cases. For example, one House member related “their input is important,” but also went on to point out, “some advocacy groups have a lot more credibility than others.” Advocacy groups lose their credibility with House members when they fail to disclose all aspects of a considered policy or proposal. House members felt they had to carefully sort out and evaluate the large amount of information they received because they could not always trust the information provided. A House member illustrated, if advocacy groups “Develop a bad reputation for putting out bad information, or not having credible enough resources” it can actually harm the process. House members desired advocacy groups to provide an honest and balanced appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of their proposals and not just present them in a positive light. To illustrate, one House member stated, “I understand what your advocacy is, but tell me what the downside is, or what the cost is, or what issues that are presented that you’re
dealing with.” House members wanted clear and accurate information regarding the positive and negative effects of the policy and its impact on the state budget.

Early childhood advocates were sometimes criticized for overly aggressive communication tactics. A common approach was for advocacy groups to mobilize their membership and send mass emails to their representatives. One House member expressed his displeasure when that happened, explaining, “We had an issue on early childhood and in one night I received over 300 emails.” Personal visits instead of chain emails were desired as a more effective strategy.

The number of advocacy groups approaching policymakers during legislative sessions can be overwhelming. Time management can be challenging for House members who desired to allow early childhood advocates opportunities to express positions on proposed policy or introduction to policy. A House member expressed his position on advocacy groups stating, “Once you understand where they’re coming from and what their philosophy is,” due to time constraints in gathering information from numerous sources, “they need to kind of step back and leave you alone.” Developing an understanding of advocacy groups’ policy position was necessary for making informed decisions. Equally important to House members was to allow time to hear additional viewpoints through testimonies and collaboration with other House members and constituents on policies proposed.

House members are leveraged by advocacy groups for funding in targeted areas during legislative sessions. Funding requests intensify as the legislative session draws near the conclusion. The number of advocacy groups who request funding for various initiatives can wear on House members. One House member felt overwhelmed when three different advocacy groups approached him with funding requests. He stated, “That just sent off alarms in my head
when all three of them came in saying they all needed money.” Advocacy groups were perceived to push hard at separate issues with early childhood instead of presenting a united plan. Tying all requests for funding to one proposal and demonstrating how the requests supported early childhood policy was of interest to House members.

**Community Buy-in to Early Childhood**

Community buy-in influenced House support for developing and sustaining rural early childhood education programs in Kansas school districts, according to the perceptions of House members. The themes that emerged from community buy-in included parents, a lack of understanding of early childhood, and the impact of early childhood programs.

**Importance of parents.** The significance of starting a child’s education at an “earlier age” was recognized by House members. What influenced one House member on early childhood education policy was who should be responsible for making the decision on what age and who should be delivering the instruction. This particular House member pushed the decision to the parents, saying “I know that there’s a move towards earlier involvement. I still think that the parents should be the ones to make that decision rather than having the government force that on them.” Another House member articulated that he also wanted parents to have a greater influence on early childhood education policy. He expressed the need for parents to acquire a greater understanding of the importance of early childhood in order to have greater influence on policy development. He stated, “I don’t think people understand the importance of early childhood education to be able to effectively influence policy decisions, particularly with those parents directly associated with young children. House members perceived parents as an integral influence on early childhood policy development, but cited the lack of understanding by many parents regarding the importance of early initiatives as a barrier to progress.
Parents were perceived as critical to the development of early childhood programs within a rural community. Parents who recognized the value of early childhood programs were perceived by House members as influential community members. These parents have the capabilities in rural communities to support and develop quality, affordable programs. To illustrate, a House member stated, “You’re just lucky if you have those people in your community that see that as a real importance.” Available and affordable early childhood programs in rural communities were perceived as essential for parental buy-in for existing or new programs. A House member acknowledged the need to make programs affordable, stating, “Making sure that all income levels of parents are able to take advantage of programs” and making programs available that “parents aren’t charged an arm and a leg for.” House members identified the importance of early childhood programs for single parent home situations and also those where both parents work outside the home. For example, one House member stated, “We have so many parents that have two jobs, single parent –we need to have a good safe secure place where kids can get as quick a jump on reading and some social skills as early as possible.” Having early childhood programs available and affordable was believed to promote parental buy-in throughout rural communities; therefore more parents would have their children attend.

**Lack of understanding.** House members cited a lack of understanding with the general public in small rural communities about the significance of early childhood education. House members noted the general public has not recognized the need for early childhood programs in many rural communities. A perception exemplifying this was a House member who stated, “I don’t think there’s a good understanding of it” in his communities. The general public does not know the role a quality early childhood program can play with child development and readiness. A House member wanted the general public to gain a better understanding of early childhood
programs in rural communities, stating, “We’ve got to figure out a way to let them know what’s going on” within available programs.

The need to educate the rural community population about the importance of early childhood education was also recognized by House members. Some of the rural population they represented did not see a need for 3 and 4 year old children attending a formal education program. If the general public was not exposed to or has not had information made available to them, understanding the need was absent. A House member illustrated, “I’m not sure that everyone is convinced there is an absolute need at this point” for early childhood programs. They recognized developing skills before kindergarten and getting more of the rural population to support that vision was a challenge. Rural communities need to understand, “the growing realization that those early years are so critical in assisting with and determining and building a foundation for a child’s success when they get into regular school,” stated one House member. Expressing his concern over citizens in rural communities lack of knowledge, one House member indicated, “I don’t think folks outside of education, and I mean the general population, totally understand the importance of early childhood education.” Small communities tend to come together to provide for the needs of their children. One House member illustrated if “that’s something they want for their children, they’ll figure out a way to get it.” Therefore, if the rural population had a better understanding of early childhood initiatives, the more likely small communities would implement these programs.

**Impact of Early Childhood Initiatives**

House members recognized the positive benefits of early childhood initiatives on children’s readiness for school, including their academic and social skills. Themes that emerged
included basic academic and social skills, social interactions through play time, early identification of students with special needs, and economic consequences.

**Foundational academic and social skills.** House members frequently noted the importance of children acquiring the basic academic and social skills needed for school readiness. To illustrate, one House member acknowledged, “There are some really good early childhood programs that give them the opportunity to have the basic reading skills and social skills to get off to a good start in kindergarten and 1st grade.” For children to acquire these foundational skills before kindergarten was important to House members. The academic pace for students to stay on track with grade appropriate standards moves rapidly starting in the first grade and continues through twelfth grade. A House member indicated, “It’s important… it’s building a foundation” as he referred to academic and social readiness skills. Early interventions closed academic and social gaps and allowed greater fluency in preparing students for K-12 success. Illustrating this belief, a House member talked about, “the growing realization that those early years are so critical” in assisting with “building a foundation for a child’s success” when they get into regular school. House members also recognized the positive impact these programs have on children during the prekindergarten years. A House member acknowledged, “In my experience, I watched some tremendous improvement with the kids.” How early success affected future academic and social skills was also recognized. They saw the positive impact early childhood programs had on the academic and social skills of three and four year old children. One House member pointed out, “It looks to me like there’s probably a better opportunity for success with that group of kids than maybe any other group that you work with, and the success becomes more visible quicker.” Most House members understood the
importance of early childhood programs to building academic and social foundations in three and four year old children.

**Importance of playtime.** House members were interested in having three and four year old students interact with each other in order to develop appropriate social skills prior to attending kindergarten. Demonstrating the importance of developing social skills at an early age, one House member stated, “Having a circle time and being able to learn to take turns and share and all of those little lessons that are so important.” She added, “Exposure to resources” they wouldn’t have at home to “help build vocabulary” and all of those things were seen as important for developing readiness skills. House members understood that exposing children by way of interacting through play developed additional social skills. They also felt academic work should not occupy the majority of the school day. Learning skills through social activities were more age appropriate, as one House member illustrated, “I would support the fact that all of our kids need to have exposure to that kind of learning through play.” House members recognized that encouraging play and social interaction with three and four year old children boosted social skills therefore building additional academic areas.

**Early identification.** Some House members saw value in providing early childhood programs where students with special needs could be identified at an early age. They understood early interventions tend to have better results and a greater long-term impact on student learning. A House member viewed providing programming for three and four year old children, if not earlier, as an opportunity to start identifying and assisting children with needs. She noted her support for early intervention, “I would like to see early intervention with autism, diagnosing it earlier, and getting the resources to the youth as quickly as possible because it can make a huge
difference in their future.” Children identified early for additional educational needs received support with House members.

**Economic consequences.** House members acknowledged negative consequences in the long run for rural communities that do not provide early childhood education programs to all children. One House member saw a negative consequence for communities not supporting early childhood initiatives or early intervening with children at a young age. She stated,

Kids grow up and end up in prison because they just never had the opportunities they deserve in school. So the old saying, it costs less to educate than incarcerate, I think there’s a lot of validity, and if we start more kids off on the right footing you’d see more success all the way through.

Another House member explained that it makes more sense to put money into early interventions than it does for expenditures to remediate students that did not have readiness opportunities. A stronger foundation would result in fewer remediation programs in future years as noted by one House member. He explained,

I think it costs less to start off well than it does to remediate later for kids who didn’t have…exposure to vocabulary building exercises, or parents at home to read to them at night, and educational activities at home…I think that we spend a lot of money later on trying to catch up with kids who started off behind their peers in kindergarten.

Early childhood programs were noted to have positive benefits for rural communities according to the perceptions of House members. They predicted negative consequences were likely in a rural community if an early childhood program was not available to all children. A House member indicated the common thread for a successful early childhood program would not only
allow students to be successful in the long run, “It will enhance and improve your community” and “improve your schools.”

Critical Factors to Sustaining Early Childhood Programs

House member participants identified several factors they believed were critical for sustaining early childhood programs in rural areas. Themes related to rural early childhood sustainability included funding, qualified teachers, transportation, and facilities are discussed.

Funding. Adequate funding was cited by most House members as playing a significant role in the sustainability of early childhood programs. In fact, funding was the most frequently mentioned factor in sustaining early childhood programs in rural Kansas school districts. This was illustrated by a House member who stated succinctly, “I think it’s about funding.” Consistent and reliable funding streams were perceived as necessary. As one House member confirmed, “I have to imagine that finances are probably the number one issue.” All participants interviewed spoke about funding as the most critical component to sustaining programs, although the approach to what funding streams should be used differed amongst participants. Possible funding streams for early childhood education were identified as state, local, federal, private, and school and community partnerships.

State funding of early childhood programs was identified by all participants as necessary for their sustainability in rural areas. House members identified lack of state funding as a barrier to sustaining early childhood programs in rural settings. A House member indicated, “I assume funding is probably the number one reason” for the limited early childhood opportunities in rural Kansas. Adding to this, another House member stated, “I think the biggest barrier will be money.” A lack of opportunities in rural communities for early childhood programs was attributed to insufficient funding by a House member who stated, “I think there are financial
barriers.” State funding would provide a stable approach for a program versus current funding streams coming from grants that must be applied for each year. Grants do not create a secure financial environment for a program’s long-term existence. State funding was viewed as necessary for any education program in the state. A veteran House member conveyed her experience with education policy and stated, “Funding is always the top issue in regards to education in any venue.” Those House members who have supported early childhood in past years still recognized lack of funding from the state was the biggest barrier to providing all students with early childhood opportunities. Adding his continued support and recognizing the need for state funding in early childhood, another veteran House member stated, “I’ve supported funding for early childhood. I’ve supported funding for all-day kindergarten.” State funded early childhood education would provide sustainability according to perceptions of House members in rural communities.

Kansas’ schools are governed by state and local responsibility and some House members saw the need for State financial assistance for local early childhood programs. This view was expressed by a western Kansas House member who stated, “Adequate funding through state” means was necessary to sustain a program each year. The state sharing in local control and responsibility was an expressed interest by a northwest Kansas House member. Currently in his area, local funding streams paid to operate the majority of the early childhood programs. Although several communities he represented did not participate in the state’s program for at-risk four year olds, a shared funding approach combining state and local resources was desired to implement and sustain an early childhood program. He stated, “I think that makes it important for the state to have a stake in it…it would be nice if there were state tax dollars” to sustain early childhood programs in all rural communities. Limited local funds meant rural communities were
not able to deliver early childhood programs in all geographic areas. Resources were hard to secure in lesser-populated areas, therefore the need for state funding was critical for early childhood programs. A southwest Kansas House member explained, “I really feel like there’s something that the state can do.”

Adjusting the state’s current early childhood education funding formula was an option for House members. The current formula funds only those four-year-old students who meet the criteria for being at-risk with a cap number approved within each school district’s annual grant application. The formula does not exclude students from attending, as that is locally controlled. Schools therefore have options to allow all children access and can choose to support the program with supplemental local funding, through limiting participation, assessing an enrollment fee, or any of these combinations. The number of students who could attend was limited due to inadequate levels of funding and this House member stated, “If that were part of our foundational formula,” the state would be responsible for funding early childhood programs in rural communities and more students could be served.

House members acknowledged providing universal early childhood programs across the state would require state funds. If early childhood education is recognized as important across the state, one House member thought, “there’s going to have to be state funding involved at some point if it becomes a program that everybody agrees is needed and is willing to step up and support.” The responsibility for educating children in Kansas rests on the state. If elected officials support preschool as well as K-12, one House member stated, “If it’s involved with education it should come from the same resources that the rest of the education dollars come from.” If state funding was utilized, an accountability system for early childhood programs would need to be in place before House members would support additional funding so that
funding streams could be tracked. One House member illustrated, “I would want to be assured that the money was going to a definite program...there would have to be accountability.” House members perceived the need for a level of accountability for additional funded programs.

State support and supplemental funding from communities was an important revenue source to pay for early childhood services. Although state funding was seen as important to fund early childhood for one House member, he also thought rural communities should find a way to supplement funding. He explained, “Our rural communities have to find a way to do this, and not just count on state tax dollars.” While most House members tied state funding to a successful program, one House member claimed,

I think that every community, even if they are not being funded appropriately, should take a close look at finding a way to have early childhood programs for that age group, 3 to 5, whether they are getting state funding or not.

A shared responsibility via state and local funding means was perceived as important to sustain early childhood education in rural communities. Rural communities must be open to all available options as one House member illustrated, “Access to resources, community support, faculty and staff, and the funding that all goes into that.” If state funding was not adequate for early childhood programs, these programs were still seen as important and needed. A House member indicated, “I think ultimately it comes down to money. Find a way to have it. Find a way to do it.” House members were most interested in early childhood initiatives funded through a combination of state and local means.

Although Federal funds for early childhood are limited, there was some interest among House members to allow for federal funding options tied to state funded responsibilities. A central Kansas House member expressed two areas should be responsible for funding early
childhood, stating, “A combination of federal and state…it would need to be part of the
distribution formula.” Federal funding possibilities were noted due to President Obama’s stated
interest in early childhood initiatives.

House policymakers commonly misunderstood federal funding streams, including what
was state and what were federal programs. For example, Head Start was often confused with
state-funded programs for at-risk children. There were perceptions that federal grant
opportunities existed for initiatives to provide early childhood programs for rural communities.
Funding streams through federal sources are not available for early childhood other than Head
Start. President Obama has requested federal dollars to support early childhood initiatives, but
these have garnered little support in Congress. Nonetheless, any new federal funding
opportunities would be welcomed by some House members to provide additional services for
three and four year old children. They believed additional state and federal grants should be
considered if newly funded programs are created. Addressing grants and federal funding, a
House member indicated, “I think there’s room for grant programs and federal dollars should not
be turned down.”

Responses varied regarding how much state funding early childhood programs should
receive to implement and sustain them. Kindergarten students in Kansas receive .50 FTE
funding even though most programs are now full day. House members expressed uncertainty
about what constituted an adequate amount to fund early childhood. One House member related,
“Maybe half of a half would be the appropriate amount to get things started,” comparing a half
day program to the current funding formula for kindergarten students. House members
envisioned early childhood programs operating from a few hours up to a half-day attendance
with funding tied directly to the amount of service provided. All interviewees felt a full FTE was
not appropriate, as another member added, “It would be fractional of an FTE.” Another House member wanted to examine the actual costs of programs because different areas of state vary with what resources are available. He illustrated, “I know you’d have to put it in a formula and look at the costs of the teachers, number of paras, and number of students per para.” Another House member did not give a dollar amount, rather proposing some opportunity provided to all children is what she would support, noting “I would support the fact that all of our kids need to have exposure.” One central Kansas House member wanted more facts and data before delivering a funding perspective stating “I don’t have enough information at this point to form a hard fast opinion on that.” Several factors and data should be examined before determining FTE.

Community and school partnerships are initiatives where school districts work with community businesses or patrons to share in costs and facilities. Regarding early childhood partnerships within rural school districts, House members displayed some interest toward this way of funding programs. One House member stated, “I think locally that there probably should be some partnerships within the community to help support some of these programs.” Although partnerships have been minimal in rural areas another House member stated, “I think public and private coalitions are a great thing.” To which another House member added, “Private funding, whether it’s corporate or benevolent, I think could very well have a growing role.” House members frequently noted private funding of early childhood from such sources as churches or businesses. Another House member also displayed an interest in private funding stating “I don’t see what’s wrong with it.” House members believed private funds should be examined with options left open for rural communities to utilize them.

Although some House members were interested in school-community partnerships, others were reluctant to pursue private funding options. Additional levels of accountability
arrive with private funds and/or grants. Rural communities generally have a low student to staff ratio and few clerical staff to track data and maintain required reporting. A House member illustrated his concern with private funding and the possibility of it becoming a voucher system for rural communities, stating,

It seems like with private funding it comes with strings attached, and I’m not sure they’re that excited. You kind of get back to the voucher system when you get to dealing with funding that comes from businesses and wealthy individuals.

An additional reservation for private funding was noted as it concerned the amount of influence private funders might have on how programs are operated. Local control in Kansas has been an important aspect of local and state government throughout its history. Private funding can take that away from programs, a fear illustrated by this House member, who stated, “I’m not against private funding. I am against private funding with a necessary influence in specific areas. So you’ve got to be a little careful with that private funding aspect. That’s a delicate one.” Corporate influence that might restrict local control brought opposition from House members. Adding to the reluctance of accepting private funding for early childhood programs, another House member described his concerns “If you have an outside large organization coming in and say, we’re going to fund this, and you’re going to do it this way, then, no, I’m not for that.”

**Qualified teachers.** Finding qualified teachers in rural areas can be challenging for some school districts. Some rural areas have challenges attracting teachers to their geographic location, some of which are in remote areas of Kansas. Finding qualified teachers depends on recent college graduates and veteran teachers seeking a particular geographically rural location. Lesser populated areas have trouble finding qualified teachers who will relocate to these areas in the state. House members were also willing to sacrifice more qualified teachers for those whom
they could pay to come to rural locations. One House member stated, “I would rather have somebody that had an associate’s degree in early childhood education” instead of a school district having no services available because it “can’t afford to hire somebody with a bachelor’s.” Due to a small number of qualified teachers, those with specialized qualifications in early childhood and special education have several possibilities as to where they choose to relocate.

**Transportation.** Transportation was identified as a consideration for establishing and sustaining early childhood education programs in rural areas. Transportation routes in rural Kansas can cover several hundred square miles in some school districts. Smaller children require necessary restraint and safety systems in most types of vehicles. For many rural districts, transportation fleets are minimal and bus routes focus on K-12 students living 2.5 miles or more away from school, as state law requires. Transportation challenges along with additional staffing expenses will be required for students living in the country to attend a preschool program. One House member illustrated the problem with “the logistics of getting a 3-year old or a 4-year old to a spot that might be 15 or 20 miles away.” Another House member was also concerned with smaller students and the need for additional supervision on buses, as smaller children transported with older students can create challenges. Three and four year old children may not be able to ride on a bus for a great length of time without requiring a bathroom break. The emotional and behavioral state of three and four year old children had one House member concerned when he stated, what “I would like to see is…they have their own transportation system with a para.” If transportation to a program was not available, distance to an attendance center would be significant for some parents. Some parents may not have the means to transport their child to a program facility several miles twice a day. One house member illustrated some concerns, “I would say probably distance, and just geography probably plays a significant role, and finances.”
When it came to the location of attendance centers in rural areas, another House member added, “There’s probably a barrier to access proximity.” The distance for children living in the country to the attendance center created a barrier for some parents.

**Facilities.** Whether facilities were a barrier to early childhood education in rural communities received mixed responses from representatives. Due to population loss and declining enrollment in several areas, some districts are able to find space for early childhood programs. Community and private facilities were also seen as viable options. One House member stated, “Many of the libraries and churches have donated a room” while another House member indicated, “I think there’s always a place to do” early childhood. Another House member observed, “I think that most of the small communities have the ability to use current facilities.” People in small communities often work together for a common cause. A House member indicated in his large regional area, “Space can be found for something that everybody agrees is important and needed.”

Not all House members had communities with the capacity to provide adequate facilities for early childhood programs. One House member expressed concern over adequate facilities, stating, “Having the availability of the facilities that would be necessary” would be challenging for starting new programs in some of his communities. The availability and cost of providing appropriately sized restrooms and playground equipment was a concern from another House member, who indicated, “That age kid’s got to have facilities that’ll fit their size, and that’s a cost factor.” Restrooms and playground equipment would need to be sized for children three and four years old, which would add to the cost of providing the program.
Six members of the Kansas Senate were interviewed for this study that represented all rural geographical areas in Kansas and both Democratic and Republican Party lines. Members of the Kansas Senate are elected on a four-year term. The geographical size of their legislative district depends upon the 2010 U.S. Census population report. Rural areas encompass more square miles than urban areas, which means more rural Senators are responsible for representing several small communities in many of the legislative districts in Kansas. Themes culled from the data analysis included their perceptions on sources of early childhood policy information, the role of early childhood advocacy groups, community buy-in to early childhood, marketing new early childhood programs, importance of early childhood initiatives, rules and regulations, and critical factors in sustaining early childhood programs. Themes are listed from the highest frequent responses.

Sources of Early Childhood Policy Information

Senators identified several sources of information they sought and used to influence policy decisions for early childhood programs for 3-4 year olds in rural Kansas. These included public school officials, KSDE, other colleagues in the Senate, and parents and community members.

Public school officials. Several Senators talked about how superintendents influenced early childhood policy development. Senators noted the importance of building relationships with superintendents within their legislative districts. One Senator explained, “I try to establish great relationships with all of the superintendents within my district as we begin talk about education policy.” Superintendents were viewed as essential sources of information who were in positions to influence policy on early childhood programs. Another Senator affirmed, “I listen
very closely to my superintendents.” Not-for profit education service centers across the state host superintendent council meetings where the superintendents gain training and up to date information on initiatives and legislation. Several school districts use service centers to share expenditures and to keep overhead down. In some areas of Kansas, rural school districts utilize service centers to assist with special services such as autism, early childhood instruction, and specialized instruction such as speech therapy, and other instructional services a rural district could not afford without sharing with other rural districts. One Senator utilized these service centers to communicate with large groups of superintendents, and stated, “I have superintendents in my district that meet at a Superintendents Council at one of the service centers.” Visiting attendance centers to communicate with administrators and teachers was also noted. Attendance centers gave Senators another opportunity to meet with Superintendents and education staff to gather information that might be used to develop policy.

Senate districts in rural Kansas cover large geographical areas and it is challenging for them to gather information. Within such a large area, elected officials have challenges reaching out to all of the communities and the people they represent. Therefore the Senators relied on their superintendents for information. One Senator indicated, “I try to get a lot of my information from feedback from my districts.” Another Senator explained she gathered information that influences education policy from “my superintendents of my senate district” as Superintendents represent all education stakeholders in rural areas. Superintendents were seen as trusted and respected sources of information about early childhood education issues. For example, one Senator confided his trust in getting information from Superintendents on education issues, stating “I really respect the opinions of my superintendents.” Superintendents speaking on behalf of teachers and getting kids ready for kindergarten was “most important to
me,” expressed one Senator. This Senator added, “That’s going to influence me the most” as he conveyed the importance of listening to superintendents and teachers. The oral testimony superintendents and teachers presented at legislative committee work also impacted Senators. One Senator spoke about testimony from teachers and administrators being what influenced him the most. The Senator illustrated, “When you have that teacher come in and talk, or that superintendent…when he stands up he’s a little more passionate…he has his facts together.” Superintendents were perceived as influential authorities about policy information in early childhood education.

**State education and research departments.** While working in Topeka, Senators described several state level areas they access to obtain information when developing policy. The Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) was noted as a reliable source of information about early childhood policy. One Senator stated, “I’ve also worked closely with state board of education staff in getting questions answered.” Another senator relied upon his background knowledge and experiences in education from serving on local and state boards of education. He utilized these experiences to access information from KSDE about policy development, noting that, “Having been elected on a local board of education and background as being elected to the State Board of Education” gave him additional insights on education policy issues. Like the House of Representatives, Senators also had access at the state level to the legislative research department. A senator illustrated, “The legislative research department is also a great resource for us” to get information. The legislative research department provided data to policymakers that proved useful as resources on early childhood policies.

**Collegial expertise.** Like the House of Representative members, some Senators utilized other legislative members to get information regarding education policy. Senators noted
committee work and testimony at committee hearings were sources of information that influenced early childhood policy. Specifically, being on the education committee was useful, as one Senator noted, “there’s a lot of things come out in there that I maybe don’t think of.” Committee work provided Senators with valuable material about policy information as one stated, “I think testimony and what we talk about in committee I think is so important; it’s a good process.” Working together with other Senate members allowed for collaboration of ideas about new early childhood policies. The opportunity to build coalitions to address early childhood education policies was imperative to Senators. A Senator illustrated the need for collaboration to develop coalitions, stating, “I listen to policymakers that also support education and try to develop coalitions that we can build upon.” Coalitions were built during the committee process by those Senator collaborating and reaching out to colleagues for policy information. Senators tended to draw more upon their beliefs and values about early childhood education than they did the scientific and technical information.

**Parents and community.** Parents and community members were recognized by Senators as important sources of information that influenced policy positions in early childhood. Reaching out to parents was important to one Senator, who indicated, “I ask my constituents, the parents, I like to know what they think about this,” regarding early childhood education. Parents were noted as important information holders regarding early childhood needs in rural communities.

Stay at home parents were noted as the best teacher for young children, even though some parents were not able to stay at home. A Senator explained his position on what influences early childhood education, and articulated, “I believe parents being responsible for the education
of their students.” Some believed stay at home parents served young children better than formal education.

Role of Early Childhood Advocacy Groups

In an attempt to examine Senator’s perceptions of advocacy groups working in Kansas, questions were targeted toward the role advocacy groups played in influencing decisions for early childhood education. Senators related the importance of advocacy groups, as well as noting their positive and negative attributes.

Positive attributes. Senators noted a common thread in their association with advocacy group information about early childhood policy development. Senators trusted and expected information from various groups along with specific staff working with advocacy groups. One Senator had one particular advocacy group representative whom he trusted for her early childhood expertise. To illustrate this, the Senator noted, “I respect her opinion a lot.” Senators generally viewed advocacy groups as providing critical information and playing an important role in helping Senators make informed decisions about early childhood education policy. Advocacy groups provided them with depth and detailed information in early childhood policy proposals. One Senator illustrated, “I value their opinion, and consequently, the information I get from organizations, is critical to being able to try to make informed decisions about the legislation that is being promoted.” Advocacy group proposals affecting policy were frequently pushed out to Senators. Policy language that had unclear information was a challenge for them due to time constraints. Therefore, Senators sought clarification from advocacy groups about policy issues such as the age of children and appropriate services. One Senator stated, “I will use the lobbyists for very specific questions so that I get both viewpoints of their organizations.” Another Senator sought out advocacy groups for information needed to develop early childhood
policy. A Senator illustrated, “There are a number of lobbyists that I get information from and talk policy with.” Senators credited the professional roles of advocacy groups and expressed an appreciation for the policy information provided by them. A Senator noted, “Gaining that knowledge and expertise from those who are more closely associated with the programming is extremely important.” Advocacy groups gained credibility with Senators when their information was thorough and professional.

The information provided by advocacy groups was more favorably perceived by Senators if their sources were accurate and presented both the positive and negative effects. Senators noted those advocacy groups that presented information in this fashion gained their trust. Illustrating this level of trust and credibility with regard to an early childhood advocate, a Senator stated, “I really thought she was fair on both sides. I mean, she brought out both sides and she was fair, and I think that’s what you ask for.” Another Senator explained his perception of a good early childhood advocacy group and stated, “A good advocacy group will always make sure that they tell you the complete and accurate story.”

**Negative attributes.** Senators were generally quite positive about early childhood advocacy groups. However, past experiences with advocacy groups and lobbyists created cautionary skepticism with Senators if they were not familiar with the group or had negative experiences. The most common doubt occurred when the advocacy group covered only the positive and overlooked the challenging issues with policy proposals. To illustrate this, one Senator stated,

The advocacy groups will come and tell me the benefits of their program. Good. I want to know that. Many times, particularly if it’s one of those that they’re trying to be exclusionary, I will ask the lobbyist, what do your critics say?
Sorting through data provided by advocacy groups was necessary to understand the impact of any proposed early childhood policy. Too many times, advocacy groups were working hard to promote a program without covering the overall effects and costs of such a program. A Senator illustrated, “I need to sort the facts from the sales job.” Advocacy groups that did not disclose all aspects of policy issues were not favorably noted. An overall snapshot of a proposed policy was important to Senators. Those advocacy groups that did not spend time on gathering and submitting requested data had an adverse effect on proposed early childhood proposals. A Senator characterized this by stating, “Sometimes the messenger can adversely impact their cause.” Senators who received large amounts of correspondence from advocacy groups toward one side of a proposed policy raised concerns. A Senator expressed, “Some will advocate sending us 500 emails when 5 well-written ones would have had the same effect.” This type of correspondence had an adverse effect on the policy position of this Senator and others in the Senate.

Rural areas with less population and smaller school districts tended to have less representation from advocacy groups and therefore receive less attention from them. One Senator illustrated this view, “I sometimes think that they look at the larger districts and they’ve got more at stake there.” Although these Senators had positive perceptions about advocacy groups providing information to develop policies, advocacy groups did not have positive results promoting rural early childhood policies to successfully pass legislation with Senators. Senators were concerned with a lack of formal representation from advocacy groups regarding early childhood education policy development for rural communities.
Community Buy-in to Early Childhood

Community stakeholders, including local government officials and parents were perceived as critical to successful early childhood initiatives in rural areas. These groups of people commonly share resources in small rural communities. One Senator framed the challenge as, “have we got enough support in the community to fund it?” Senators said gaining support required their constituents, especially parents, to have a better understanding of the need for early interventions. Community buy-in required, “Districts, constituents, patrons of the district…to have a better understanding of the value of early childhood development,” as a Senator stated.

A perception Senators had about early childhood programs in rural areas included barriers created due to parents’ lack of understanding of the need. A Senator explained, “The biggest barrier is the parents’ lack of understanding” about the need to get children ready for kindergarten. Reducing problems in schools both academically and socially might happen “if the parents were more involved even at a much younger age” according to a Senator. Parental involvement was believed to increase the amount of buy-in to early childhood initiatives. Rural communities relied upon the parents to promote and demonstrate a need for early childhood programs. One Senator remarked, “It’s got to be important to the parents within communities for early childhood programs to be more successful.” Parental buy-in was seen as a serious deficit for rural early childhood programs, “I also think the parents’ buy-in is important. The parents have to want this” stated another Senator.

Marketing Early Childhood Programs

Senators made note of getting parents and community members to buy-in to the need of an early childhood program and a focus on marketing to accomplish community buy-in. Promoting the need for early childhood programs to the public, one Senator explained, “So the
marketing of an idea, somebody has to have the energy and the idea to push it.” Educators were perceived necessary to take the lead in marketing early childhood education programs in rural areas. One Senator explained, “You have to have a teacher who sells it. I think the superintendent has to sell it.” Marketing early childhood programs was frequently mentioned “I think it needs to be sold,” stated another Senator. Marketing to parents and communities were not the only areas Senators noted. One Senator directed marketing to the legislature for appropriations of funds, stating, “We’ve got to convince rural legislators that it’s worth the expenditure.” The importance of readiness prior to kindergarten requires an increased level of marketing early childhood education programs to rural communities stakeholders.

Importance of Early Childhood Initiatives

Through the interviews, Senators acknowledged the importance of early childhood education initiatives. Senators frequently communicated the importance of student readiness and children possessing the necessary academic and social skills before kindergarten. The need to start preparing children for kindergarten at a younger age was noted by a Senator, who stated “the earlier we can begin that process the better outcomes that we have” for making the transition into kindergarten. Children have “the ability and the desire to learn at a much younger age,” stated another Senator as he recognized how important it was to utilize early learning opportunities to prepare children for kindergarten. Senators recognized the positive impact of early childhood education on the K-12 structure. Schools are pressured for students to score well on assessments and Senators believed providing early education would help children perform better during their K-12 years. A Senator illustrated, “I think early childhood is very important to any school district” to lower the achievement gaps prior to kindergarten. The positive benefits of early childhood programs were expressed from a personal standpoint. Due to positive
experiences with her children attending early childhood programs, a Senator stated, “It was worth it to me” to have her children involved in a formal structure prior to kindergarten. Senators perceived early childhood initiatives as necessary prior to kindergarten, often drawing upon their own experiences.

Senators perceived all students should have opportunities for growth and development prior to kindergarten. Referencing the research, one Senator explained,

I think it has shown to be an important factor on the growth and development learning aspects of young children and I think it should be an important piece of the pie in rural Kansas just as it is in urban Kansas.

In rural areas where early childhood education is often missing, some policymakers recognized this as a lost opportunity for growth and development that adversely impacts student readiness prior to kindergarten. A Senator illustrated this stating, “I would say that the area where rural areas are missing the most is when you just don’t have it,” or “you don’t have that opportunity.” Growth and development of young children were acknowledged as opportunities important to rural early childhood initiatives.

**Critical Factors to Sustaining Early Childhood Programs**

Sustaining early childhood programs in rural Kansas faced numerous challenges according to Senate participants. Themes emerging from the data included funding, qualified teachers, transportation, program requirements, and facilities.

**Funding.** Funding was the most prevalent response to the question about what was needed to sustain an early childhood program in rural Kansas. Funding early childhood programs in Kansas requires legislative commitment to appropriate funds each year with additional required resources allocated by local school boards. One Senator explained the
challenges this places on local school districts this way, “At the local level they can only do so much…the state has to step in and try to help local school districts with the funding.” Local school districts are forced to prioritize their available resources after funding K-12 educational requirements. This makes it difficult to create new programs and initiatives, as one Senator noted, “at this point the main barrier would be funding, state funding” regarding challenges to fulfilling rural early childhood opportunities. In rural areas, “the real challenge is the lack of financial resources” to adequately “provide early childhood education in rural areas.” The funding burden has been placed upon local school districts to provide opportunities with limited resources.

Early childhood education programs were signified as not only a funding responsibility by state policymakers but also an equity issue for all students regardless of where they live. All school districts in Kansas do not offer a program for four-year old children. Senators believed state funding for early childhood education should be available to all students in all areas. A Senator explained his position by stating,

I think the State of Kansas, again, the legislature, needs to step up and do more, especially in rural districts so that rural districts can give their young kids, their young children the same opportunities that exist in districts that have the financial resources to provide those programs. I think it’s a real fairness – I think it’s an equity issue quite frankly, and we want our school finance system to be equitable both at the K-12 level and at the preschool level.

Regarding how to fund an early childhood program in rural Kansas, Senators noted state funded early childhood would bring consistency to rural programs. A Senator indicated funding should come from “the state level” to secure a sustained effort in rural areas. Supporting a move
away from the current grant funded options toward state funding to make early childhood program available to all children, one Senator stated, “Just do it all in that funding formula and not through the grants.” They called for adding early childhood education funding to the current K-12 funding formula, instead of relying on grants from the tobacco settlement, which has been the predominant funding source for early childhood education in Kansas. One Senator disclosed his concern of the uncertainty of funding early childhood education through the tobacco settlement, stating, “My frustration has been not being able to see the long term picture of that, and if that funding stream is lost what are we going to move into its place?” The numbers of grants for early childhood have not been increased for several years. Funding for school districts applying for new programs has not been increased due to finite state funding of the grant program.

The amount required to fund and how to fund early childhood programs brought forth various thoughts from participants. Currently kindergarten students receive .50 FTE funding and students in grades 1-12 receive 1.0 FTE funding in Kansas. Most early childhood programs in Kansas do not require all day attendance, therefore most Senators did not think 1.0 FTE funding was appropriate. One Senator’s perception about funding early childhood programs was, “I would think it would be less than what it would be for K-12,” but went on to add “I think it also depends on the number of students available.” Actual costs of program delivery due to a variety of enrollment differences were noted. How much funding to provide was dependent upon determining the expenses to run a quality program. One Senator illustrated, “What costs the money is putting the teacher in the classroom” and in “a good building,” and that’s where you spend the majority of money. These factors varied within his legislative district; therefore he was interested in actual costs.
Although many Senators would not expand on the amount of funding necessary, they agreed the first step was a commitment by legislature to fund early childhood programs. A Senator illustrated, “I think it comes from the Kansas Legislature,” with the initial step being “The legislature needs to make a commitment.” Legislative support of early childhood programs was characterized as a form of investing in the state’s young children. For one Senator, a legislative commitment “to invest in our kids at an early age” would have positive results “because in the long term it’s going to pay off.” Most Senators displayed support for early childhood programs. Legislative support to fund early childhood programs would be a “wise expenditure of tax dollars” and adding to this support another Senator stated, “It’s going to pay off to get children ready for school.” A commitment by the legislature and elected leadership would make sure children have “the kind of reading skills and thinking skills that they need in order to succeed in their K-12 education” and that was necessary to justify the allocation of legislative funds.

Private funding generated some interest with Senators but they were concerned private funds may not be available in all rural areas. Small communities have limited pools of resources and most are shared across several areas of need. Rural communities where industry does not exist have even more limited options for private funding. One Senator explained private funds have “great value” and for those where it “is a possibility, it’s wonderful” but also added “I just don’t know that it’s universal across the state.” Private funding also brought discussion about local community partnerships.

A community partnership within rural communities incorporates a shared responsibility for resources, transportation, staffing, and facilities to operate an early childhood program. One example of community partnerships mentioned was for a local community college to operate an
early childhood center. A Senator indicated, “It could be a local project within the community” to share resources and programs already in existence. Business and industry in rural areas have partnered with schools to provide early childhood programs. Although limited to a few rural areas, “the business community has gone into providing private funding” for early childhood programs, related a Senator. Perceptions about partnerships were positive and “may be a chance” for some rural areas “but the majority of the money is going to have to come from State funding” expressed one Senator. State funding was seen as the stability piece to sustaining early childhood programs in rural Kansas, as partnerships were not possible in all areas.

**Qualified teachers.** A few Senators discussed highly qualified teachers as a critical need for sustaining a good program in rural areas where teachers are hard to find and the selection pool is small. A Senator representing both small and large districts characterized this perspective, “Finding the quality of trained teachers that can work with early childhood development” and attracting that kind of person to rural areas “is at times difficult.”

Not all Senators expressed concern over finding highly qualified teachers. Specialized early childhood teachers were not necessary to these participants. They felt elementary teachers already working in rural areas were suitable for hiring in early childhood education programs. One Senator stated, “I think there are a number of people out in the profession that can do those jobs.” His perception about the availability of qualified teachers was “I think there’ll be a sufficient work force to be able to fill those positions” if licensed elementary teachers were allowed to teach in prekindergarten environments.

One Senator was reluctant to identify a lack of qualified teachers because he supported early childhood programs conducted in the home with a parent. In supporting parents working with their children instead of placing them in a formal school setting, this Senator explained, “If
you have good parents at home that are working with that kid, they’re going to be far better” than other options. He added, “It’s just how important I believe parents being responsible for the education of their students,” without being critical of teachers and their respected roles.

**Transportation.** Senators identified transportation issues due to distance and the amount of time a child might spend riding the bus at this age as a concern for parents and school officials. In rural areas, children are transported several miles out from an attendance center due to school districts that can cover several hundred square miles. Children are limited from the opportunity to attend early childhood program if transportation is not available. A Senator noted, “Transportation might even be a little more important” than qualified teachers, and went on to ask if there is not a school bus, “are the parents willing to drive them in every day?” The logistics of transporting small children due to safety restraint requirements, mileage to and from attendance centers, and early childhood programs that function for part of the day created challenges in rural areas.

**Program requirements.** Program requirements were a concern for some Senators. The areas of required curriculum, required attendance, and bureaucratic regulations were discussed. A state sanctioned standardized early childhood curriculum was not favored, as this approach would be “limiting the programs at the state level,” according to one Senator. Local control to make curriculum decisions should be left to “those people with boots on the ground” to be able to make the decision for their own students.

Required attendance was also not favorable to Senators interviewed. Parental input should be factored as “different parents have different ideas on what that should look like [and] when they want their kids to be in school” stated one Senator. Senators had different perceptions regarding what age children should start formal education. One Senator responded, “I think 3
year olds,” while another Senator added, “Those two real formative years before they actually get into kindergarten” would prepare children for kindergarten. Another Senator indicated 4 year olds should attend, stating, “I definitely think 4-year olds,” but was reluctant to require all 3 year olds to attend, but acknowledged, “I think there are probably some 3-year olds that may be ready.” Required attendance was difficult for Senators to sort out and some were reluctant to take a stand on what age was appropriate.

The amount of bureaucracy, paperwork, and the process for accountability through the current grant funded programs required for early childhood had some Senators apprehensive. One noted, “The state has made it so tough on them, the hoops they have to get through, and the paperwork.” Facility requirements for three and four year old children to start up early childhood programs in rural areas created financial challenges due to bureaucratic rules and regulations. Rural communities that looked into new programs found challenges due to “new and more rules and regs” on facilities, a Senator stated. He went on to add, “I have heard stories of that stopping certain locations” from attempting to start an early childhood program.

Facilities. All participants discussed facilities as a barrier to sustaining early childhood programs in rural Kansas. A Senator explained that most of his districts have adequate facilities but some of the small districts may have problems stating, “I can see facilities being a problem in some of my districts.” Appropriate facilities for this age of students might create challenges in rural areas as another Senator added, “In general I feel like we have facilities in lots of areas in rural Kansas, but maybe not the kind of facilities that they need.”

Some Senators noted facilities were available and adequate in communities where the population numbers were falling. Due to declining school enrollment or available vacant buildings in rural communities, one Senator indicated facilities were not a barrier in his district,
stating, “I’ve never heard anybody say that a facility is a barrier.” Another Senator agreed by stating, “I think there’s facilities available…I don’t think facilities would be much of a challenge.” He added, “I think if people want to make it happen they’ll find the spot.” A Senator supported this position and added, “I don’t believe facilities are really a challenge. I think you could make the space and make room for this kind of programs within existing facilities.”

**State Board of Education (SBOE)**

Four members of the State Board of Education (SBOE) were interviewed for this study representing different geographical areas in rural Kansas. Members of the Kansas State Board of Education are elected on a four year term. The geographical size of their represented area was dependent upon the U.S. Census population report and incorporates the legislative boundaries of the Kansas Senate. Rural areas encompass more square miles than urban areas, and this affected SBOE members who covered several small communities and counties in many of the legislative districts in Kansas. Two of these elected officials represented the largest geographical areas of all elected policymakers in Kansas other than the Governor. Themes emerging from the data analysis included their views on sources of early childhood policy information, community buy-in for early childhood, the role of early childhood advocacy groups, the positive impact of early childhood initiatives, access to new early childhood, rules and regulations, and critical factors in sustaining early childhood programs. Themes are listed from the highest frequent responses.

**Sources of Early Childhood Policy Information**

When asked where SBOE members go to get information about early childhood education, responses were more streamlined and consistent in a few specific areas compared to other elected officials. Practitioners in the field of education were the predominant response for
getting information for the development of early childhood policy. SBOE members stated they made frequent visits to school districts. Their communication with teachers and administrators was more evident than the other groups participating in the study. An eastern Kansas SBOE member illustrated, “I go to the practitioners” and “administrators” were “who I listen most to.” Depending on what education policies were being considered, a western Kansas SBOE added, “I talk to teachers when I have an opportunity.” SBOE members also reached out to educator friends to get information. Teachers who have school age children provided relevant input toward early childhood policies. As a former classroom teacher, one SBOE member stated, “I have lots of friends that are teachers and educators” that she continues to stay in contact with and utilize on important issues that affect the field. Teachers’ perspectives were highly valued and utilized by SBOE members. The experience a classroom teacher brought to the table was important to these SBOE members. An SBOE member related he listened the most to, “Actual people on the ground, because I think you can tell more about how well a program works by talking to people trying to implement it than you can any other way.” Kindergarten teachers were especially important for early childhood information. When “looking for early childhood needs and inputs” one SBOE member turned to “primarily kindergarten teachers” for early childhood information. Kindergarten teachers provided them with examples of the needs of children that arrive in their classrooms each year.

Superintendents also provided SBOE members with valuable information regarding implementation of policies and the potential effect of policies getting studied. When a policy affected programs in schools, superintendents were sought for input. One SBOE member stated, “I talk to superintendents to get their positions and ideas about how certain policies would affect them.” Another SBOE member who represented the largest square mile district utilized
superintendent councils for gaining perspectives on issues. Superintendent councils generally meet once a month at regional service centers to collaborate and discuss state issues. An SBOE member took advantage of these meetings stating, “I like to hear from the Superintendents’ councils,” noting within this large district she had “3 different Superintendent councils” to attend each month.

These SBOE members also called upon the Kansas State Department of Education for information regarding early childhood education policy decisions. KSDE provided qualified staff interested in the success of students. One SBOE member referred to KSDE with high regard when he stated, “We listen to what the Department of Education says.” While another indicated “the staff at KSDE is very good about informing us on issues.” Researched information was provided by KSDE for SBOE members in early childhood education.

Researching policy implications utilizing professional journals was another area SBOE members obtained information. Keeping up with researched practices was important to be able to make informed decisions, as one SBOE member shared, “I read to see what might be out there in the way of research or national studies.” SBOE members cited the use of research more often than other elected policymakers.

**Community Buy-in for Early Childhood Education**

State Board of Education members were consistent in reporting the importance of parent and community support for early childhood education. They identified community stakeholders including parents, educators, businesses, and the private sector. One SBOE member recognized the importance of these stakeholder groups working together, “I think when education works best, at whatever age level; it’s a community effort, a collaborative community effort rather than just a school effort.” Funding was not the only major consideration for establishing and
sustaining early childhood programs in rural areas. An SBOE member explained, “You also need parental and community support,” and that’s an “attitude type of support” to actually produce a viable program. If an early childhood program is actually meeting “the expressed need of the local community,” another SBOE member articulated “that would be a primary driving factor for its continuance.”

To improve community buy-in for early childhood programs, better communication from educators to community members was identified as a need. According to one SBOE member “there’s not really good strong communication between education providers and the community.” Most programs required some “community input,” and if the community perceives it is integrally needed “they will rise to that and provide whatever support that they’re required,” noted one SBOE member. Board members believed communicating the needs to rural stakeholders would result in a better understanding of the importance of preparing children for kindergarten and would improve the “community perception about how much the services are needed.” SBOE members believed community buy-in would rise if parents were invited to participate in the conversations about developing community programs. An SBOE member illustrated this view, “parents and community members brought into that decision making process” would build sustainable early childhood programs. Community buy-in for universal early childhood programming will require “a lot of work to lay the groundwork” so that it does not “step on the toes of people” already providing services.

**The Role of Early Childhood Advocacy Groups**

SBOE members were consistent in their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of information advocacy groups provided and how it affected policy decisions. SBOE members believed there was a need for early childhood advocacy groups. One SBOE member stated, “We
listen to all advocacy groups” and when “we want something done, we ask them to help us.” This SBOE member characterized the relationship as “a partnership.” The ability of advocacy groups to influence policy makers was cited as having the largest impact on early childhood. To illustrate, one SBOE member stated, “If there weren’t advocacy groups or even individuals advocating for early childhood, I think most law makers, policymakers, would probably not know as much about the positives.” SBOE members consulted with several advocacy groups to gain as much information as possible before making policy decisions, as this SBOE member stated,

I think the role they play is in providing information so that you know where the needs are, and then letting us know what their suggestions are for responding to those needs from their perspective…I think you have to look at a lot of different perspectives before you finally decide on a policy to meet the need that exists.

Advocacy groups were credited with providing the research needed to make informed policy decisions. Advocacy groups generally utilized research to guide the platform and position they were advocating. An SBOE member illustrated, “I think they play a very positive and helpful role because they have immersed themselves in the issue and have done the research.” All SBOE members believed advocacy groups played a positive role and sought them out for input into policy decisions.

**Positive Impact of Early Childhood Initiatives**

SBOE members recognized the positive impact of early childhood programs. Social skills learned through play were seen as making a difference in learning for 3 and 4 year olds. An SBOE member recognized the importance of these skills indicating, “Helping them develop interactive skills and being able to communicate and exposing them to a lot of experiences” was
important. Although early childhood education standards “are introduced to these children,” SBOE members touted the positive benefits of social interaction through play time offered through early childhood programs. Noting the importance of developing young children’s social skills, one SBOE stated, “Formal education involves more than just academic. It involves socialization and many other aspects that children learn when they are in a small group together, with play and other things that help them develop.” SBOE members perceived social interactions to develop communication skills were important components of early childhood education programs.

When comparing Kansas’ early childhood offerings to those of surrounding states there was a sense of urgency among SBOE members that Kansas might be falling behind. The lack of foresight on the part of Kansas policymakers was a concern. For example, one SBOE member discussed, “I don’t think we’ve thought very far ahead…how are we going to compete with the states that have all day kindergarten and have some preschool programs?” Young children learn and pick up skills at a rapid rate. SBOE members cited a need for early childhood opportunities because at these ages of children are ready to learn. As it concerned young children’s brain development, one SBOE member stated, “Those little children have sponges for brains. They soak up everything.” SBOE members demonstrated a need to create opportunities for three and four year old children or possibly lose ground with other states that offer early childhood education programs.

**Program Requirements**

SBOE members were willing to support community preschool programs if mandatory attendance was not required. Although SBOE members were supportive of all children having the opportunity for early childhood education, not all of them felt that stay at home parents
should be required to send their children if services were appropriate in the home setting. One SBOE member indicated, “None of these programs I think should be mandatory, but ought to be encouraged.” Another SBOE member also had reservations about requiring all 3 and 4 year old children to attend early childhood programs. That reservation applied regardless of the setting. When asked about required attendance in a public school setting, one member stated, “I’m not positive that we need to make certain that every child goes to a public setting, or that we fund it to that extent.”

These SBOE members felt strongly that parents needed to decide what was best for their children. One SBOE member shared, “I do know that some parents prefer not to have their children involved in an organized setting as early as 3 and 4 years old…I think that ought to be respected as well.” Stay at home parents also influenced SBOE members’ perceptions. Along these lines, one stated, “I also think there’s a lot of attitude that 3 and 4 year olds should not be subjected to organized school, as such…In my experience I maybe see a little of that attitude as I go into rural communities.” Strong family values were also significant to one SBOE member. Children being raised in strong family environments should not be required to attend preschool, as one SBOE member stated, “In situations where kids are in strong two-parent families where there’s a stay-at-home mom who is adequate to the job, I’m not sure that formal education is necessary prior to kindergarten.”

A few SBOE members were more inclined to require attendance. One SBOE member elaborated her expectation of an appropriate level of participation that would impact student learning. She explained,

In a perfect world, I’d like to see all four year olds be in some type of a preschool. That they get at least 2 hours every other day or some type of – and I say formal education but
I don’t mean formal instruction, I mean the appropriate instruction for a four year old. Three year olds, it would be nice if they could attend, also. But it’s very helpful when these children start preschool if they have at least gone to day care or something and that they’ve had some experience away from their mother, away from, and playing with other kids.

SBOE members most frequently responded that early childhood education should be available to all children but attendance should not be required.

**Critical Factors to Sustaining Early Childhood Programs in Rural Areas**

SBOE members identified several barriers to implementing and sustaining early childhood programs in rural Kansas. Themes culled from the data analysis are presented in the order of importance and included lack of qualified teachers, transportation, funding, and facilities.

**Qualified teachers.** Qualified teachers were a concern with most SBOE members. One SBOE member indicated some geographical areas cannot find highly qualified teachers in early childhood, and remarked, “Qualified teachers, if they find them at all” was a fear in some areas. Another SBOE member added, “You would need to have individuals who are qualified to be early childhood educators.” Some concern was expressed that the lack of qualified early childhood teachers would result in programs using elementary teachers for that purpose. An SBOE member stated his concern,

My concern is in some of the areas they’ve taken teachers in kindergarten and first grade … to pick up hours in preschool. There’s a big difference in educating a preschooler and a kindergartener and a first grader on just the dynamics of your classroom and how you
set up that classroom, and, how you manage that classroom…it concerns me that if we don’t train these teachers right, we frustrate kids before they get started.

Contrary to findings from both the House of Representatives and Senators that elementary teachers or those with associate degrees should be allowed to teach early childhood education, SBOE members perceived only a teacher qualified with early childhood license should be teaching three and four year old children.

**Transportation.** Transportation in rural areas is a challenge due to the distance, the driving time, and the quality of roads between communities and attendance centers. An SBOE member expressed, “It takes travel, on 2-lane roads” to transport children to and from program facilities, which was cited as a concern related to mileage and adequate roads and highways. To illustrate the challenges associated with transportation in rural areas, another SBOE member used the example of how school consolidations over the years has increased the distance between attendance centers. The SBOE member expressed, “you have a consolidated setting so you don’t have the closeness…miles may be an issue…availability of transportation could be an issue.” Transportation has created challenges for rural areas due to distance and safety requirements for restraining young children.

**Funding.** All participants discussed funding early childhood programs. Ideas about how to fund programs varied amongst SBOE members and lack of funding was identified as a barrier to implementing and sustaining early childhood programs in rural areas. For example, one SBOE member noted when it came to offering early childhood programs, “One key area is funding, and having the money to do it which is a problem right now.” Several SBOE members believed the state should provide more funding. State funding allowed more stability for rural school districts according to participants. The Kansas legislature has been charged with funding
K-12 according to the Kansas constitution; therefore the first step before creating additional programs to fund would be to fully fund the current formula. An SBOE member illustrated this view, “I would first like to see us take care of what the Constitution has charged us with, K-12.” Another SBOE member made a similar comment, “I feel the state needs to play a bigger role in funding” but also acknowledged in the current climate, “just finding the money for our K-12 programs is difficult.”

Kansas funds kindergarten students at .50 FTE even though a high percentage of school districts offer all-day kindergarten to prepare students for first grade. SBOE members perceived acquiring a fully funded kindergarten program was the first step in funding early childhood programs. One SBOE member stated, “They first need to…get kindergarten right…I know that dollars are few, but we have to take care of the kids, they’re our future.”

The need for adequate funding for early childhood programs was the general perception of SBOE members. Perceptions about the amount to fund early childhood education varied amongst SBOE members. When asked to identify the amount of funding necessary to operate preschool opportunities for three and four year old students, one SBOE member indicated, “For preschool, I would think it would need to be funded at the same level as kindergarten if you really wanted to have a program that addresses the needs of all the children.” Actual costs drew interest from an SBOE member who stated, “I think that it should be based on the best possible estimate of actual cost of the program.” Expanding preschool opportunities was approached by one SBOE member through reinstating funding that had been lost over the past few years due to budget cuts. Addressing funding lost in the school finance formula, one SBOE member stated, “I think we lost funding instead of gained…it would mean reestablishing …and adding to it…might be something that the legislature could do a little bit at a time in its expansion.”
SBOE members conveyed some interest in private funding as an avenue to expand early childhood education opportunities in rural Kansas areas. One SBOE member identified community partnerships as an opportunity worth investigating, and stated, “I think a partnership is necessary so that I think local communities should carry a proportionate share of the funding…I just think it ought to be a shared responsibility, community and the state, based upon need.” Local foundations were of interest to utilize for funding opportunities. One SBOE member explained, “Many school districts now have a foundation or maybe there could be a separate foundation for early childhood.” Not all SBOE members saw private funding as a viable funding source due to issues with equity and sustainability, as one SBOE member illustrated, “Private funding is taking care of it right now. It’s just like everything else; it’s not available to every child.” Although private funding drew interest from SBOE members, most of them could not give a clear picture of how that would look from community to community and if some rural communities could even have that opportunity available.

**Facilities.** Facilities were discussed as some districts have challenges and others did not according to SBOE members. Existing facilities within communities were identified as possible locations for early childhood education. Declining enrollment in some rural school districts resulted in empty classrooms due to fewer sections or grade level classrooms being needed. SBOE members indicated those school facilities could be utilized for early childhood education programs. Budget cuts over recent years have resulted in classrooms being open and available in school districts due to fewer staff in elective and core areas. One SBOE member stated, “If they have the space, they’re in a declining enrollment.” Although most SBOE members expressed concerns over facilities in some rural areas they represent, one SBOE member also indicated,
“communities can be very creative when it comes to making room for those programs…I think the facilities can be found” in rural communities in her areas.

Some programs were currently housed in private buildings according to SBOE members and this practice was deemed acceptable to participants. One SBOE member clarified, “In western Kansas, a lot of preschools are done through churches and private preschools.” Another SBOE member added, “There are more private preschools and church preschools than public” relating this to the possibility of public schools utilizing already existing facilities if needed.

Access to Early Childhood Education

SBOE members felt rural areas have a need for early childhood programs just as urban areas. Mobility of the population in western Kansas due to increased numbers of migrant workers and students moving from one district to another was challenging for school districts. Positive results in student learning were noted in those areas that had implemented early childhood opportunities. The differences in academic results were evident in rural areas that could not provide these services. One SBOE member illustrated this by stating,

We have a lot of mobility, so children who are perhaps 3 and 4 year olds in a rural area may end up being in a larger community…So it just seems to me that it would be good at least to have it available.

The needs of migrant families were also noted with SBOE members. A lack of access to programs created challenges for children traveling with migrant family workers.

Advocacy Groups

Advocacy groups were represented in this study by three pro-education groups and one adversarial group that focused on fewer taxes in Kansas. Although the study focused on provision of early childhood in rural areas, it is significant to note that advocacy groups in
Kansas were generally located in urban areas like Topeka, Salina, and Kansas City. These groups represented specific areas of interest across Kansas. Themes emerging from the data included their perceptions of sources of early childhood policy information, the role of early childhood advocacy groups, program requirements, access to early childhood, community buy-in for early childhood, and critical factors in sustaining early childhood programs.

**Sources of Early Childhood Policy Information**

Advocacy groups pulled important information from sources identified to leverage policy development. Themes emerged as sources of information advocacy groups used for policy included research, economic value, and political landscape.

**Research.** Most advocacy group representatives said they relied on research to guide their position on early childhood initiatives and platforms. Research areas noted by advocacy groups included brain development and long term research studies.

Research areas overlapped for most advocacy groups depending upon the area of focus within a proposed policy, but all were well documented. Capturing those early years when the brain is developing gained the attention for early intervention initiatives. Brain research guided one group’s movement, as an advocacy representative talked about the importance of the latest research on brain development in young children.

I think it’s hard to get around that brain development research. I think that so much emphasis has really been placed traditionally on older children and we know now that those earliest years are really key and will impact a child’s ability once they get to school. So I think really the research on brain development is one of the keys.

Brain development research from birth to age five drew significant interest from advocacy group representatives. One advocacy representative illustrated how the research supported intervention
in the early years of life, “this information around brain development and that critical window of time that we have with kids that are birth to 5.” Brain research and the effects with early intervention attracted one advocacy representative to early childhood. She emphasized, “The brain development…is very important to why I do this” and was what drew her to advocating for early childhood. Another advocacy group representative was concerned about community members and legislative representatives’ lack of knowledge about the research on brain development, stating, “we just haven’t shifted our mind set…learning how much brain development occurs during that first 5 years of life, and we need to shift our focus.”

Advocacy groups commonly utilized research results to support a position in early childhood education policy. Evidence based learning was talked about by advocacy groups because it presented the actual research results, therefore a reader could see how the conclusions were reached. Evidence based learning was an area of research that engaged one advocacy group when advocating for early childhood. An advocacy group representative stated, “I believe I have a strong understanding of evidenced based learning based on multiple studies” as she referred to examples of how she used research in her line of work when she is in the field. Literacy was the focus area of another group, whose representative stated, “Certainly the research in early literacy is comparable, just showing that those very early experiences can impact the development of reading.” Reading skills and research supporting child development was recognized by another advocacy group representative, who stated,

I think that we’re learning a lot with research about how early children are beginning those, to build the fence foundations for early literacy, language and vocabulary, and some of the things that maybe even 10 years ago people were less aware of.
Although most advocacy groups were up to date on current research areas on early childhood, one advocacy group representative did not utilize early childhood research. He indicated, “I really don’t have any understanding of it or background in it.” The focus of this advocacy group was on less governmental involvement along with fewer taxes. This group would not support additional use of public funds for early childhood programs.

**Economic value of early childhood education.** An advocacy group representative discussed the future economic value of young children and emphasized the impact early childhood has on the local, state, and federal economy. This advocacy group’s entire funding structure originates from large businesses and corporations. This representative stated, “I tend to focus more on the economic development piece of early childhood and understanding the benefits of investing early in children” as they advocate for their vision. This group researched K-12 education as they began pioneering an advocacy approach. This group began with interested business Chief Executive Officers (CEO’s) and was drawn to early childhood because it was an age within K-12 education where potential investments were believed to have greater success compared to later education years. This group perceives that the cost of investing in early childhood would be returned as an economic benefit. A pro-education advocacy representative also utilized long term research statistics to support the economic results from high quality childhood initiatives. She explained,

Economists have also shown that high-quality early childhood programs bring impressive returns on investment to the public. Total return per $1 invested: Abecedarian Project through age 21, $4.10 nurse family partnership high risk group, and $5.70 Perry Preschool through age 40 as a source of information.
These long term research studies were discussed by advocacy group representatives. These studies have provided hands on data for advocacy groups’ platforms to display positive results to policymakers. The High/Scope Perry study (Belfield et al., 2006) in particular was mentioned as a credible long term study that showed the benefits of early intervention well into adulthood, as one representative indicated,

The Perry-preschool or the Michigan project, that really shows that if you really fully invest in early childhood you will not only be raising kids who are ready to learn in school, but down the road there is more opportunity for them to be employed, therefore being members of society that supports society, less incarceration, fewer divorces. The ripple effect of high quality early childhood is immense, and I can fully support that.

The long term effects of early childhood programs were noted by three of the advocacy groups with regard to successful K-12 and through adulthood.

**Political landscape.** The need to understand the political landscape was noted by two advocacy group representatives. The political landscape can alter or force advocacy groups to adjust their platform and the information needed to advance their position. These advocates believe politicians who now make up the political landscape have not stayed up to date with current education trends. To illustrate, an advocacy representative expressed the opinion,

I believe that our early education system was created in the 50’s with the mindset of K-12. It was created during the industrial revolution when kids were to go, K-12, and the only thing that they had in common was their age.

Advocacy groups characterized additional areas of the political landscape that influenced early childhood programs in rural Kansas. One representative referred to a divided political landscape
according to party affiliation, which has stalled progress toward creating early childhood education policy,

If a D [democrat] says it, we’re going to criticize it this way, and if an R [republican] says it, we’re going to criticize it that way, and that is just so counterproductive. I think it’s worse than counterproductive; I think it’s probably something that’s contributed a great deal to some of the problems we’re facing.

Changes in the political landscape play a central role within the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). Changes to the political landscape influenced early childhood education policy in Kansas.

**Role of Early Childhood Advocacy Groups**

As previously noted, advocacy groups were not located in rural areas. Consequently, discussions related to the role they played influencing education policy were not always targeted at rural settings. Early childhood advocacy groups identified their perceptions of the role they play influencing policymakers and the development of policies. Representatives were passionate about their group’s vision for helping children become successful.

Early childhood advocacy group representatives were ardent about the positive effects of initiatives prior to kindergarten. Creating opportunities for children to be in a safe and healthy environment was an important delivery model for most advocacy groups. Identifying and promoting state policies that “encourage children to be in high quality care and education” prior to kindergarten was the role of one advocacy group. The vision of what early childhood education should look like required educating policymakers. One advocacy group representative illustrated, “We certainly have a voice in terms of insuring that our policymakers are educated about what does early childhood look like.”
The need for parents and community members to understand the importance of proper nutrition for young children was also encouraged by advocacy groups. One advocacy group representative stated, “I think kids should have access to nutritious foods.” Another added health related needs of students that could be met through programs,

Though our organization is truly focused on educational policy, what we’ve learned is that there are other factors that can inhibit a child from learning including toxic environments, general health issues, and the fact that they come hungry. When you have a program in place where they’ll be fed on a regular basis and be nurtured, I think that that’s also key in the brain development of a 0-5 child.

Advocates perceived one of their roles was to educate parents and community stakeholders on child nutrition. Some children in rural communities do not have these resources available.

The annual state budget captured the attention of all advocacy groups. The role they played with influencing how funds were allocated was well defined in all groups in the study. Three pro-education advocacy groups sought out any and all funding opportunities for early childhood initiatives. When resources are on the table in Topeka for children ages 0-5, advocacy groups are there to insure these children are “included in those resources” noted one advocate. Early childhood initiatives currently funded are closely guarded by advocacy groups. Every year advocacy groups felt like “we are put in a position to fight for funding for early childhood programs,” as one put it. In recent years where budgets have been drastically cut, advocacy groups have worked hard to maintain programs at the current level of funding. Advocacy groups paid attention to the tobacco settlement dollars and the Children’s Initiatives Fund (CIF) as those funds have been distributed to early childhood programs in past years and were threatened to be moved for other purposes. Discussing the funding of early childhood programs and the
important role advocacy groups use to leverage those funds, one advocacy group representative stated, “We spend a lot of our time fighting for the CIF.” Recent years have focused more on maintaining and fighting for status quo in funding with a lack of platform efforts to build upon what is already in place or to push for a universal approach for all children in Kansas. Pro-education advocacy groups felt in recent years, they have been put in a position to fight for keeping current CIF early childhood education funding, therefore additional funding expansion has not been the focus.

The economic effects of early childhood programs have gained attention of businesses across Kansas. Therefore, one advocacy group representative wanted advocacy groups to play a stronger role in policy development, in raising awareness in the business community about the positive relationship between early childhood education and economic development. She articulated,

I do not believe that advocacy groups have been at the table on the early learning decisions as much as they could, particularly when you look at the business community. I think the business community has been asleep when it comes to educational policy and advocacy, but they are waking up and realizing that we need to be having conversations about this, as an economic development issue if for no other reason.

Supporting this statement, an adversarial advocacy group representative indicated, “I don’t hear a lot of talk in the circles I’m in about early childhood education.” The long term economic effects of early childhood education was perceived to have positive impacts in rural communities, but that message was not communicated well in the business sector.

The media impacts legislation throughout the legislative sessions, therefore advocates saw one of their roles was to ensure the media accurately presented information about proposed
policies. Addressing the media as it concerned the potential impacts of policy, one advocacy group representative stated, “I think that we can point out to the media when policies are being proposed that are just not in the best interest of children and their families.” Pro-education advocacy groups felt they were needed to ensure the media had accurate information regarding potential policy effects in early childhood. Advocacy groups adversarial to education were perceived to have resources to distract media coverage for necessary public education programs.

Although indicating the organization was not against early childhood programs, an adversarial advocacy group representative stated, “the role we play is debunking what a lot of other advocacy groups say.” This advocacy group spoke about lower taxes and smaller governmental involvement in early childhood education. This organization perceived their role was to question early childhood advocacy groups because, “they provide information, whether it’s legitimate, or all the information or not, are an open question.” The facts and figures used by early childhood advocacy groups were questioned. His perception was that these groups do not divulge necessary funding information when presenting policy proposals. Advocacy groups opportunities to influence policy revealed dissimilar perspectives. This advocacy group representative also believed the responsibility for early childhood education was the parents and should not be funded through state dollars.

How do you draw the line between what is a parental responsibility, and this might go into the determination of whether it’s within the educational interests. What’s parental responsibility? If it’s parental responsibility, it’s not the citizens or the state’s responsibility.

Parental responsibility for early childhood was advocated in place of state funded early childhood programs across Kansas with this advocacy group representative.
Community Buy-in

All advocacy group representatives discussed the importance of community buy-in along with the community interest in early childhood programs. They identified support from parents, taxpayers, local patrons, and business influences were important to a program being successful. Educating communities about the importance of early intervention was viewed as a challenge, as noted by one advocacy group representative, who stated,

I think there is lingering misconception about what early childhood education is. I think that some parents really worry that their child’s going to be behind a desk memorizing flash cards and not able to play and do things that are important for children.

Communicating early childhood needs was challenging due to the ideology among some parents that young children should remain at home until they reach school age. A representative illustrated this view, “I think that there are some misunderstandings about what quality early childhood is” and went on to say, “I think that there’s also some idea still that children belong at home before they go to school and it’s hard to counterbalance that in some cases.” Another advocacy group representative also identified this as an issue and added, “I think that the barriers might be some of those – I’m not sure what the best term is, societal norms, or this idea that children belong at home until they go to school.” Rural communities were perceived to lack parental buy-in because they identified the best early childhood programs were offered by stay at home parents.

Discussing buy-in from the political side of early childhood, an adversarial advocacy group representative stated, “I think that’s a decision for the citizens. With education, because in Kansas, I mean every circumstance I think would be unique.” Another advocacy group
representative perceived a lack of buy-in from policymakers who believe mothers should stay at home with their children, and illustrated this perspective,

I would also say the political will is not there. And it is an ideology in terms of – right now I think more of our political leaders believe that a mom should stay home with their kids. And when they tell me that to my face I want to ask them who do they believe is in the work force, especially in rural Kansas? Women have to be out in the work force.

For advocates, obtaining community buy-in for new early childhood programs was difficult when it came to prioritizing educational components at the local level. One advocacy group representative stated, “How do you prioritize early education with regards to all other elements…What’s more important, early education or football? People don’t like to prioritize.”

In recent budget cuts, early childhood programs have suffered due to other funding areas being prioritized ahead of early childhood.

Parents, community members, and policymakers were recognized as key players to get buy-in for a successful early childhood program. Advocacy groups felt the importance of early childhood programs was not always recognized because of misconceptions to differences in daycare versus structured educational services.

**Age Requirements**

Advocacy group representatives expressed varying opinions about what age formal education should be accessible for young children, with most identifying 3 and 4 as the optimal age for most children. One advocacy group representative affirmed this view, “I believe the 3-4 year spectrum is the best place to start.” Another advocacy group representative indicated the age of 4 was desirable for making a successful transition into kindergarten by stating, “I think by the time a child is 4 years old they really benefit from being in a more formal setting that helps
them to transition into kindergarten and helps them to learn some of those expectations and the environment that they’re going to encounter in kindergarten.” Another advocacy group representative recognized a successful program in a bordering state, and stated, “I’ve seen programs piloted in other states where it’s strictly a 4 year old program and that works as well.” Three of the four advocacy groups advocated all four year old children access to early childhood education.

Starting programs for children at the age of three was mentioned by one representative, who stated, “I think in terms of being outside of the home and in a more formal setting, 3 years old is probably a very appropriate time…I think it really depends on the child and the family…what’s available to them.” One advocate saw learning starting at birth and recognized the importance of taking advantage of providing enrichment during those birth-5 years. For example, an advocacy group representative shared,

I think the mistake that all too many people make that people believe that education starts at 5 or at K [kindergarten]. It doesn’t; it starts far before that. If you’re learning how to share, if you’re learning how to take turns, if you’re learning to listen, if you’re learning to sit and share your toys with other kids, those are very important skills that I think sometimes are overlooked. And I think that the alphabet, and the ABC’s and all the things that tend to be taught in kindergarten, all of that, there are some precursors to that sharing of knowledge that really does happen in birth to 5.

Three of the four advocacy groups supported three and four year old children attending early childhood education opportunities.
Access to Early Childhood Programs in Rural Areas

Advocates believed not only parents working with children at home but also parents who are not able to provide early childhood services should be able to access voluntary early childhood education programs in rural communities. An advocacy group representative illustrated this by stating,

That’s why I believe it’s essential to implement a voluntary pre-K program. If you’re getting that at home with a family member, fine… you want to have access; kids should be able to have access to 3 and 4 year old early learning.

The problem with opportunities in rural areas is the lack of availability and access as described by an advocacy group representative, “They’re [early childhood programs] just not available to all people…The availability is not there.” The advocate went on to express his concern about the lack of affordable, quality early childhood programming in rural areas, “Unless you have the funds to send them to a private pre-K, they’re sitting at grandma’s house, or an aunt’s, or in front of the TV,” or young children are sent “to a non-accredited babysitter.” Early childhood advocates distinguished between the need for increased availability of quality services and not merely providing day care or babysitting for young children whose parents work during the day.

Critical Factors to Sustaining Early Childhood Programs

Advocacy group participants noted barriers to sustaining early childhood programs in rural Kansas. Themes arising from the data included qualified teachers, transportation, funding, regulations, and facilities. Although differing in their approaches, advocacy groups found some areas more important than others with some of this based upon regional locale.

Qualified teachers. Availability of highly qualified teachers was a concern for some groups. Defining highly qualified teachers was also discussed, as rural areas sometimes have
trouble securing qualified teachers. They mentioned the importance of having qualified teachers along with adequate professional development. One representative stated, “I think having trained educators is an issue…getting teachers who are trained out into rural areas, and then maintaining that training through professional development.” Related to the challenges that arise from lack of professional development due to expense in rural settings, one representative indicated,

I think a well trained workforce with professional development … I do think that those things are available in the state but I think it’s so hard for the practitioners and teachers in rural areas to get to some of those because they’re not always available in rural areas and sometimes can be cost prohibitive.

Not all advocacy group representatives believed teachers needed to meet highly qualified early childhood licensure requirements. For example, one representative expressed,

I would say not everyone has to have a bachelor’s degree in early childhood to provide high quality. I think if you have your associate’s degree, I think if you have your child development credential in early childhood, you can be coached and supported to provide a high quality environment.

Other participants did not agree with this view, although they recognized it was directed toward rural areas where quality people who may not have a bachelor’s degree could have opportunities to assist when licensed staff is not available.

Transportation. Transportation of young children was identified as a potential barrier for parents and educators. Smaller school districts are not always able to meet the requirements for vehicles to be adequately equipped with child protective harnesses due to the additional expense for a small number of students. The distance between the attendance center and the
child’s home in rural areas is inhibitive for some parents. One advocacy group representative stated, “Transportation is an issue, and it’s hard to reach critical mass for programs in some areas that are not as densely populated.” One advocacy group representative raised the question about who would be responsible for paying for the transportation, “that’s one of the fundamental questions that goes back to, what is it that the citizens of every community are responsible for paying for, regardless of where the child lives?” An advocacy group representative responded to a question whether transportation was an issue with parents, expressed, “Transportation…absolutely.”

Facilities. Facilities for young students was concerning in some rural areas. Adequate restroom facilities and play areas equipped for this age of student can financially challenge small communities. An advocacy group representative articulated, “I think that having modern facilities can be out of reach in a lot of rural areas.” The need for appropriate restrooms located near classrooms was specified by an advocacy group representative, who stated,

It may not be appropriate for those 3 and 4 year olds to be in a school based program where you have to walk halfway down the hallway to the restroom. A 3 and 4 year old can’t wait that long, and 3 and 4 year olds are messy.

An advocacy group representative covering a two state area indicated facilities can be a challenge, admitting, “More in the rural locations…the facilities issue does come up…you go back to the funding because it costs…to build one or renovate an old facility to make it [comply with] Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).” A Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) is an organized way to assess, improve and communicate the quality of early care and education programs and after school programs that families consider for their children.
Network members use rating and improvement strategies to elevate the quality of care in state early care and education systems and to support and improve children’s development.

**Funding.** Qualified staff, facilities, and transportation all feed into the equation of funding early childhood programs. Implementing and sustaining early childhood education in rural areas was dependent upon funding according to advocacy group representatives. How the funding or if the funding should be available from the state formula had mixed perceptions. Federal, state, local, private, and partnerships will be discussed in these findings.

State funded early childhood drew interest from advocacy groups. The amount of funding necessary for 3 and 4 year old programs was discussed. One advocacy group representative stated, “I think that one full FTE for kindergarteners is appropriate, and so I think that ½ FTE is appropriate for 3 and 4 year olds.” A step toward funding prekindergarten students was expressed by another advocacy group representative who stated, “If we could get .5 FTE for 3 and 4 years olds and 1 FTE for kindergarteners that would be a huge step forward for small children.” Another representative expressed their group’s position on funding per pupil as looking at actual costs, state, and federal averages. Illustrating her position, she stated, “I would advocate for somewhere closer to the $10,000” annually per student to cover costs of highly qualified teachers and age appropriate instructional materials.

Most advocacy group representatives mentioned the state’s funding formula for K-12 education and advocated for a state funded program supported in the K-12 education tax structure. One individual stated, “I do believe it should be part of the tax structure that funds our everyday K-12 spectrum…I think that the funding formula should include pre-K through 12.” Another advocacy group representative added, “I think that it should come from the school finance formula.” Another advocacy group representative expressed a need for a state funded
early childhood program and noted the political challenges policymakers are confronted with by stating,

I truly believe it is a government function, just like the K-12 systems are. If you really look at the research of a high quality early childhood and the economic prosperity that can come to a state or to communities after those kinds of investments are made, it’s puzzling to me why we don’t have that kind of support. But as any politician, you are waiting to be reelected. You can’t wait 18 years to see that kid graduate from high school and then another 4 years to graduate from college and then see their economic impact on the state.

Three of the advocacy groups supported a tax structure that would ensure early childhood services were implemented in all school districts in rural communities.

Although an adversarial advocacy group recognized the role legislation has for funding public education, the implementation of early childhood education using state funding raised questions. This advocacy group representative pushed the funding issue to the legislature, “The legislators, I think rightfully so, are expected to decide what the educational interests of the state are.” A tax supplemented program was addressed as a question of whether taxpayers should fund early childhood education at all, and if so, whether it is universal or is locally supplemented. The advocate explained, “This is not something that taxpayers are responsible for under the constitution. It doesn’t mean that it’s not available, that citizens are still able to get early childhood education; they’re just getting it through different sources.” Other sources included the private sector; church affiliation or daycare. Expressing the challenges to fund early childhood programs, he stated, “first and foremost, the biggest conversation killer is funding.
It’s expensive to start a new program with early learning.” Funding an additional program that was not defined in the constitution was not favorable to this advocacy group.

Advocacy group representatives discussed whether private funding was an option. Most acknowledged that private funds are not available in small communities. Although some privately funded preschools have been very successful, one advocacy group representative expressed, “I think it’s really difficult to have a sustained funding structure that relies heavily on private dollars.” Although the reference was statewide, one advocacy group representative indicated, “I think that there are early childhood opportunities available in the private sector, even if the school district isn’t doing it … Churches do it … that’s part of the private sector.” Funding early childhood programs using private dollars were mentioned by one advocacy group representative, who stated, “I think where we’ve seen private dollars be most effective has been in creating facilities in those infrastructure costs.” Facilities provided by private sectors were favorable, as it filled a possible vacant facility within a community.

The possibility of school and community partnerships drew interest from advocacy groups. The notion of community educational foundations was appealing. One advocacy group representative stated, “We have a handful of foundations that support early childhood.” Another advocacy group representative indicated a strong interest in partnerships when she said, “Another marriage that needs to take place is the private or community public engagement.” Partnerships were more available in urban areas, but there was interest in all locales to find funds for early childhood opportunities. A representative summarized her position about partnerships in rural areas and noted,

Public-private partnership would ensure resources are stretched to the maximum.

Unfortunately, private resources can be hard to come by, especially in rural areas.
Government funding is essential to building and sustaining a high-quality early childhood system across Kansas. Partnerships found interest with advocacy groups although the mechanics of how that might look in rural Kansas presented challenges due to the limited availability of private funds and what those funds would be used for.

**Coalitions.** Coalitions are created when individuals and groups come together to address an issue. Coalition building occurs when various individuals or organizations came together to achieve a common goal. Advocacy groups participating in this study did not exhibit strong coalitions for early childhood policy initiatives. An advocacy group coalition was mentioned by one advocacy group representative, but she did not provide information that would indicate there was an active coalition working on early childhood education issues. One advocacy group representative stated “the coalition is also statewide,” but also did not provide evidence of any early childhood coalitions impacting policy movement to fund programs in rural areas. In fact, another advocacy group representative stated “I do not believe that advocacy groups have been at the table on the early learning decisions as much as they could.” Coalitions were mentioned, but not found to be impacting early childhood education. The only evidence of coalitions was during correspondence and follow-up communication with advocacy group representatives. A coalition was organized with preparations, issues, and meeting dates set for the upcoming legislative session.

**Superintendents**

Five superintendents representing seven rural school districts were interviewed for this study. Two of the superintendents had recently relocated to a new school district. Both of these superintendents referenced their current position and the past district where they also served as
the superintendent in a rural setting in Kansas. Rural superintendents in this study represented three Kansas school districts participating in the KSDE approved four year old early childhood program and two were not participating in the KSDE four year old early childhood program. Themes identified from the data analysis included their perceptions of sources of early childhood policy information, sources of early childhood policy influence, the role of early childhood advocacy groups, community buy-in to early childhood, the positive impact of early childhood initiatives, and critical factors in sustaining early childhood programs. Themes are listed from the highest frequent responses.

**Sources of Early Childhood Policy Information**

Getting accurate policy information was an important process for the superintendents participating in the study. Superintendents serve on the front line for early childhood policy recommendations to locally elected boards of education. Therefore, it was an important for them to have researched policy recommendations prior to making presentations to their board of education. Some early childhood policies start with the superintendents and other policy considerations may come from the federal or state level before arriving at the board of education. Superintendents were asked what information influences them when developing early childhood education policies. The ranges of influences were characterized by people and organizations superintendents could trust for valid information. Themes that emerged were local and state expertise along with parents and local businesses.

One superintendent felt empowering his board of education who represents stakeholders in his district was important. Due to his community’s demographics, he sought input from, “my current board as well as myself” because “we just make decisions based on what’s best for kids and we believe preschool education is what’s best for kids.” Locally elected board members
represented a wide range of professional duties outside of serving on a board of education. Another superintendent looked to an individual on her board for expertise, indicating, “We have an early childhood specialist on the Board of Education.” Trusted information was provided by superintendents as well as other board members when board members provided pertinent information about policy.

The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) provided superintendents with valuable information. Early childhood specialists provided superintendents with information specific to potential early childhood policies. A superintendent illustrated it this way, the “Kansas State Department of Education for some of their early childhood resources” was utilized for policy information.

**Influences on early childhood policy.** Community faith-based affiliations, parents, and private childcare providers influenced some rural superintendents’ decisions about early childhood policies. In a more affluent school district where the Catholic Church had a large presence, policies that intruded upon stay at home parents were avoided. The superintendent acknowledged, “We have a lot of stay at home moms and we have to overcome that; that we’re intruding on family time and normal child growth with mom.” Policies were developed with clear language that did not interfere with family time.

Parental influences were also perceived to be the best advocates for rural school districts. The absence of formal advocacy groups in rural Kansas forced parents to fill the role as “they’re the ones who are pushing us to do more” stated one superintendent. Parents “see the benefits of it over a home daycare type” where it is more of an institutional and educational setting.

Local daycare businesses in small communities influenced rural superintendents. In small communities, daycare providers rely upon a minimum number of children with daily
attendance in order for the business to survive. A superintendent characterized this by stating, “We have some pretty good daycare providers” and our local boards are concerned, “so we have to be careful not to step on the toes of trying to get in the way of business.”

**Role of Early Childhood Advocacy Groups**

Superintendents noted advocacy groups as influencing policy development. Superintendents identified several advocacy groups they believed influenced early childhood policy decisions at the local level. It is significant to note that none of these superintendents mentioned any of the early childhood advocacy groups operating in the state as influential. Instead, they turned to their professional organizations. The Kansas Association of School Boards (KASB) was frequently noted by superintendents. A western Kansas superintendent related how he utilized KASB, saying “if it’s a legal issue,” he was comfortable utilizing them. An eastern Kansas superintendent expressed the influence of KASB adding, “I think KASB is a good advocate for preschool education” and KASB’s influence “carries a lot of merit with our school board members.” Superintendents facilitated local board members to “attend those conventions and trainings put on by KASB.” A northwest Kansas superintendent spoke about three organizations they used to assist their district with policymaking, stating, “We rely on KASB” and he also relied upon “the Department of Education.” The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) also provided information for a school district where the superintendent was also the elementary principal. NAESP provided him with professional development in the areas of early childhood. Advocacy groups were seen as important for specific policy issues, as one superintendent indicated, “I think advocacy groups, they have their place and they have their meaning.” Advocacy groups were useful for targeted issues in policy development.
Early childhood advocacy groups were not all perceived in a positive light when it came to assisting rural Kansas school districts. One superintendent perceived advocacy groups with an early childhood education agenda as lacking political clout, “They mean well. I don’t think they have a lot of strike with a legislator or a governor.” Another made a similar observation, “Obviously they don’t carry a whole lot of weight statewide or we could have a better early childhood programs throughout the state.” One superintendent perceived early childhood advocacy groups targeted too many narrow areas of interest that occurred only where money was available. They noted parents and children stricken by poverty do not have the opportunity to influence advocacy groups. In western Kansas these concerns were communicated by a superintendent who expressed early childhood advocacy groups are “only advocating for one particular aspect of early childhood or one particular need in early childhood” and not the greater picture across the state. This superintendent did not think certain populations of students were properly advocated for and did not have the means to do so. Schools join whatever advocacy group “you need to fit your bill,” and yet “there’s no way that’s going to cover all children.” So as a whole for early childhood, advocacy groups were viewed as not helping the entire population of Kansas; “it’s only helping those groups that have the means to have an advocacy group,” observed a superintendent.

Moreover, advocacy groups supportive of early childhood were identified as missing in rural Kansas. This lack of presence was recognized by a superintendent who, when asked about advocacy groups, stated “In my area, none.” Advocacy groups did not have positive reviews when it came to successful implementation and funding early childhood initiatives in rural communities according to the opinions of these rural superintendents.
Some advocacy groups were noted by superintendents to be working against additional education initiatives that increased government. One superintendent illustrated “There can be some negative influences” and some of these other groups are “naysayers for public education” working against additional funding for education initiatives.

**Community Buy-in to Early Childhood**

Community buy-in was vital as noted by most superintendents. Local school board members have a great amount of influence and their pulse on community interests while communicating needs to small rural communities. The findings indicated an absence of knowledge or capacity to deliver early childhood education in rural areas.

Superintendents believed community buy-in would increase if the cultural aspects of the students needing early childhood were addressed. A western Kansas superintendent whose district currently offers a four year old program identified the need to facilitate things like “culture differences.” The needs of young children between the “German Mennonite or Hispanic population” and “not just a home of poverty” are quite different. Addressing the needs of these populations was critical, as “they just have a different take” and those adjustments have been challenging and affect buy-in for those families.

Superintendents believed education of the community about the need for parents to assist their children while at home would facilitate early childhood education initiatives. Superintendents felt some parents do not have the resources to understand a child’s growth and developmental needs at ages 3-4. A superintendent expressed, “it’s not just teaching the child; it’s teaching the parent how to be a parent and the stages of the child and what to look for and how you can facilitate and help.” Superintendents felt challenged to attain buy-in for early childhood education if the parents are not knowledgeable about the impact a program can have
on their children. A requirement to screen all children was suggested by a northwest Kansas superintendent. If parents had a gauge to assist them in determining how their child was progressing academically, that would be an important indicator to get their child participating. He suggested, “Requiring all parents in some way to have their children screened by the age of 3 and then placing some sort of requirement on them to receive services for their children if they’re below the level.”

Superintendents of rural communities had to overcome perceptions that it was inappropriate to send 3-year-old children to a formal setting to prepare them for kindergarten. Stay at home parents were also viewed as not knowledgeable about what early childhood programs could offer. A superintendent stated, “We have had to overcome that” as parents needed to be assured “it’s okay to send your kid out of the home at the age of 3.” Superintendents in rural communities relied upon parental support to send their children to school prior to kindergarten while acknowledging it was not easy to convince parents it was acceptable.

Many patrons in rural areas were perceived as not having the knowledge regarding the positive impact of early childhood education programs. Referring to a lack of knowledge about research studies supporting early childhood initiatives, a superintendent illustrated this notion, stating, “I still don’t know that everybody understands the studies that have shown the impact that early childhood 3 and 4 year old education has later down the road, not just at 5 year olds, but even beyond the grade school years.” Communicating the benefits of early childhood education and the positive results of research studies was an expressed need for patrons in rural communities to become more aware of the need for early childhood services for all children.
One of the rural school districts operating early childhood educational services brought a different perspective to parent buy-in. The superintendent indicated they were past the need for parent buy-in and were moving forward. Parents now have participated in a successful program “so they’re no longer seeing that as being a hold back.” Superintendents with established programs brought a different perspective to parental buy-in and they focused more on legislative buy-in to support the overall needs or established programs for all children.

**Positive Impact of Early Childhood Education**

Superintendents noted the positive results in school districts implementing early childhood programs. They recognized the benefits of providing early childhood education. One superintendent explained the positive results seen with his current programs stating, “That’s the area that I’ve really seen great results with are our 3 year olds.” He felt students who participated in the program were better prepared for kindergarten. Another superintendent looked at the positive impact of serving 3 year old students in heading off potential problems. He indicated, “If we’re not getting them at 3 we’re in trouble” and added “there’s a lot of social issues that arrive with kids at kindergarten.” Some children never catch up; consequently you have some huge issues that you “may never fix.”

When examining the positive impact of early childhood programs with superintendents, they noted the benefits for low-income children. For example, a superintendent indicated, “the demographic that we see getting the most growth would be your low income families, which we don’t have very many of, so we really feel like that’s an important offer to them.” English language learners (ELL) involved in early childhood education in one district also displayed positive results. One superintendent illustrated this, stating, “that’s the other demographic that we see the most growth in.” The positive impact of early childhood has meant less remediation...
in later years for students who had displayed significant delays. The importance of providing services for these students was a concern for one superintendent, who expressed, “we’re seeing more and more kids, especially 3 and 4 years old, with significant developmental delays, and unless we can start them as 3 and 4 year olds, by the time they get to kindergarten they are not even close to being ready.” In support of this observation, a superintendent in a district that does not have a program available to all children, validated students that do not have services available, fall behind. In his district, not all 3 and 4 year old students have the opportunity to participate in early childhood education, other than special education students. He verified, “That’s strictly it. Nobody else can go” due to a lack of funding.

**Age requirements.** All superintendents agreed that 4 was the minimal age requirement for preschool programs. One superintendent related, “I would like to see all 4-year olds in at least some sort of a half day preschool.” Another superintendent agreed, “I believe that 4 year old range is good for preschool,” because his three year olds currently have “a system in place for special education placements.” A superintendent stated “That really depends on what goes on at home.” If the parents at home do not provide any support in reading and doing anything extra to educate their child, then “I would rather have their child at age 3” stated one superintendent. Another superintendent added, “I think early childhood in Kansas should include all students 3 and 4 years of age, at least should have the opportunity to be in preschool, at no cost.” Superintendents in general, expressed interest in having more opportunities for children ages 3 and 4.
Critical Factors to Sustaining Early Childhood programs

Superintendents noted barriers implementing and sustaining early childhood programs and their perceptions of current programs. Areas that emerged with superintendents included availability of qualified teachers, transportation issues, funding, and facilities.

Qualified teachers. Finding early childhood licensed teachers can be a problem in rural areas of Kansas. Early childhood teachers with experience in growth and development were important to these superintendents. A western Kansas superintendent stated, “It’s having instructors that are knowledgeable in the early childhood stages.” Another superintendent remarked, “I think finding qualified staff members, because there’s a difference between daycare providers and what makes them qualified, and what makes a teacher and teacher licensure qualified.” Some superintendents wondered if they could even find qualified teachers, as one shared, “I’m not sure if we would find highly qualified teachers for that area or not.” Along the same lines, another superintendent added, “That’s a piece that, especially in rural America, I think getting somebody who is qualified and licensed to provide early childhood” would be challenging. If qualified teachers were available, one superintendent indicated that money would be a problem in paying a qualified teacher, stating, “We just don’t have the money to hire qualified teachers in those areas.” Qualified teachers and ongoing training was lacking in rural areas. A superintendent in western Kansas identified teachers and training as a problem for rural districts, expressing, “the availability of teachers and probably the ongoing training of those teachers in early childhood” would be a challenge. One district had resorted to alternative licensure to secure staff, as the superintendent noted, “My past few preschool teachers have had to go through an alternate certification in order to get early childhood” licensure.
Superintendents frequently spoke to the need to find qualified teachers along with ongoing training to stay up to date or train a teacher seeking a licensure in early childhood.

**Transportation.** Transportation was an especially challenging barrier for rural superintendents. One superintendent’s district covered 900 square miles, while most school districts in this study covered 300 or more square miles and usually more than one community. Transportation along with the amount of time a student is transported on a bus can be challenging for school districts regarding the age of students in this study. One superintendent illustrated this by stating, “Transportation would be huge.” The type of vehicle or bus required and the costs associated with transporting this age of student twice a day was a concern. One superintendent explained, “Transportation, that’s big money if you’re doing routes morning and noon every day.” Another superintendent identified transportation as a barrier to establishing and maintaining a successful preschool program, stating, “I think the biggest barrier for us has got to be transportation of those kids, getting them to school for a half a day program.” The superintendent of the largest square mile district represented in this study conversed; “My school district is 900 square miles. The transportation is always a big issue.” He went on to add “If we ran a half day program and had to pick up a new route or something like that it would be an additional expense for us.” If safety restraint requirements and the instructional time with K-12 students were arranged, transportation could be coordinated with existing routes. Transportation for rural students was imperative for some parents to achieve daily attendance. School districts are not required to transport this age of students but if they decide to transport, they must follow legal requirements and use proper safety restraints in vehicles.

**Funding.** Funding was seen as the driving force behind a successful program for all superintendents. Most issues centered on having appropriate funds to facilitate effective
programs. Areas participants identified as potential funding streams included state funded early childhood education, private funding, and partnerships.

State funding was a frequent topic of discussion toward establishing and sustaining statewide programs for preschool students. Superintendents noted an increase in the numbers of poverty stricken children justified the need for full state funding of early childhood education. One superintendent expressed, “I believe with the diverse population and at risk students we have in rural areas, I believe that preschool education should be fully funded by the State of Kansas and should be a half a day program for the students.” Another superintendent wanted to see kindergarten fully funded as a first step. She also indicated the amount 3 and 4 year old students should be funded by the state, specifying, “I definitely think they should be funded as a full student” because this age of children “could use those kinds of services.” Another superintendent articulated, “I think it should be state funded, undoubtedly, not just for IEP kids. I think it should be for all kids.” Fully funded kindergarten would allow flexibility for other ages of students, as one superintendent directed, if the state would “just fund kindergarten at a full FTE,” that would allow us to “use some of the funding that we make up for in the 5 year old program to be moved down to a 3 and 4 year old program.” Providing early childhood classrooms with additional funding for transportation costs included were noted by a superintendent, who stated his desire to see, “the funding of the program with the transportation.”

Superintendents noted state funding was the most reliable source of revenue to sustain early childhood programs. A combination of federal and state funding was also supported and important to district superintendents. One superintendent supported expanding funding sources from other areas, stating, “I believe it needs to come from the state and the federal government.”
President Obama has requested assistance for early childhood education programs across the United States.

Federal and state investment in children at an early age may provide societal savings in the future. Costs of not investing in young children were noted as an additional state expenditure later in many cases. One superintendent illustrated “I just think in Kansas it’s got to be a priority of educating these kids at a younger age.” He went on to add “I think that will be a cost savings down the road from those kids when they get in trouble with juvenile detention centers, or incarcerated, on welfare or unemployment.” This finding was consistent with the House of Representatives and advocacy groups; the belief that investment in early childhood education would pay off in the long term.

Funding from the federal government was the first option for only one superintendent as she stated, “I think the federal government has to get behind it first.” Federal government supporting and funding early childhood initiatives would allow more doors to open funding initiatives at the state level.

Private funding for early childhood garnered limited interest among superintendents in rural areas, primarily because rural areas have limited private funding resources. One superintendent flatly stated, “In my area there is no private funding anywhere.” Along the same lines another superintendent added, “I don’t know of very many possibilities.” Moreover, private funding might not be available from year to year. Worrying about the future of programs when injecting private funds, one superintendent stated, “We have not used any private funding” because the worry with private funding is that “you never know when it’s going to go away.” The lack of industry to support private funding of early childhood initiatives was discussed by two superintendents with one noting, “We just don’t have a lot of business in our area, or a large
per capita of wealth so I don’t see private funding working in our area.” The potential for private funding not being available from year to year was a concern of superintendents.

**Facilities.** Facilities for this age of student can create additional challenges for some rural areas. Districts with declining enrollment tend to have available facilities with only minor changes to restrooms and playground areas necessary. Declining enrollment created additional space for one superintendent, who indicated, “Our district has had declining enrollment, so we have the availability of classroom space, and playground space.” Another rural district had just passed a bond election and will now have adequate facilities. The superintendent stated, “In our last bond issue we’ve incorporated our lower grades, our preschool/kindergarten grades to actually be in our tornado shelters. So, facilities are not a barrier.” A superintendent who has been in two rural school districts in the past two years expressed, facilities have not been a concern for early childhood “in either district,” relating “we had really good facilities.”

Other superintendents had fewer options for preschool facilities. When asked about facilities being a concern for early childhood programs, a superintendent stated, “they are, and as we’ve grown they’ve become a bigger barrier…we’re afraid we’re going to have to start limiting our enrollment.” Growing student enrollment created a challenge for this superintendent.

**Summary of Findings**

The summary of findings presents common themes identified from the five groups, which included House of Representatives, Senators, State Board of Education members, Advocacy groups, and superintendents representing rural communities in Kansas. Across the five groups, three overarching themes emerged from the data analysis including (a) influences affecting policy in early childhood, (b) early childhood sustainability in rural Kansas, and (c) collective support of early childhood education. The findings are organized according to themes derived
from the data analysis (Merriam, 2009). Each theme will be summarized with descriptive themes that emerged in each area of implication.

**Perceived Influences on Early Childhood Policy**

Participants identified influences they believe effected policy in early childhood education. Themes included areas of policy information, community buy-in, and the perceived influence of advocacy groups.

**Policy information.** All groups identified individuals and organizations they trusted for information pertinent to developing education policy. The most frequent source of information for elected policymakers was professional educators, a group that included superintendents and other administrators, and teachers. Elected officials sought out relationships with trusted professional educators for information that affected early childhood education.

Members of the House of Representatives and Senators also sought other colleagues that commonly served on education committees for policy information. The findings identified legislative colleagues as trusted sources that provided specific information about early childhood policies. Those colleagues appointed to committees were perceived as experts about the scope of proposed early childhood policies. Those committee members were privy to available information and testimony.

The legislative research department was identified by House of Representatives and Senators as a reliable source of information on early childhood education policies. The legislative research department was viewed as providing unbiased information in a prompt manner for policymakers. State Board of Education members also utilized research, but frequently this information was provided through KSDE or their own professional readings.
Perceived need for community buy-in. For early childhood programs to advance in rural areas, policymakers and school officials identified a need to educate the community about the importance of early childhood education in order to gain their buy-in. The most predominant area noted by all groups encompassed sharing the importance of early childhood programs with policymakers, parents, and community members. Participants frequently noted these stakeholders lacked knowledge about the benefits of early childhood education to a child’s growth and development. Study participants acknowledged that research has supported the long-term effects of early childhood education.

Perceived influence of advocacy groups. Advocacy groups were utilized and sought out by some elected officials. Early childhood advocacy groups who were identified as credible were trusted and utilized frequently by elected officials. Although SBOE members along with some House of Representatives and Senators sought out advocacy groups for important information, not all participants identified advocacy groups in a positive manner. Some House of Representatives and Senators felt advocacy groups’ communication tactics turned some policymakers away and those advocacy group representatives that did not share the entire picture of a proposed policy were not credible. Superintendents of rural areas did not find a successful link between availability of early childhood education programs in rural communities and advocacy groups. Advocacy groups’ presence was not felt in rural areas, rather being centralized in urban locations. Therefore, superintendents tended to look to KASB and other professional organizations for information and assistance more than early childhood advocacy groups.

Required program attendance. Participants did not agree on the age of required program attendance or how long each day a child should attend. Some participants felt it was up to the parents or grandparents to educate the child prior to kindergarten. Four year old children
gained the most interests when it came to requiring attendance. Participants supported early services prior to kindergarten for children who were identified for special services. Three year old children had minimal support and required attendance was not favorable.

**Early Childhood Sustainability in Rural Kansas**

Themes developed regarding barriers to implementing and sustaining early childhood programs. Themes that cut across all groups interviewed included funding, qualified teachers, transportation, private partnerships, and facilities.

**Funding.** The most frequent theme for all groups was availability of funding to sustain early childhood programs in rural areas. The need for a stable funding source was consistently noted among all participants for implementing and sustaining early childhood programs in rural Kansas school districts. The amount needed to fund rural programs was not agreed upon, but the importance of state funding to sustain long term programs was frequently noted by all groups. Although private funding was noted as a possible option in all groups interviewed, state and federal funding options were perceived to be the most stable options for sustaining early childhood programs.

Elected policymakers displayed an interest in early childhood partnerships in rural communities. Partnerships might open doors for the use of facilities and allow private dollars to be utilized to implement new programs. Superintendents were not favorable to private funding, as sustaining these funds from year to year would be doubtful. Long range planning would be difficult for superintendents when revenue sources are unclear from year to year. Some policymakers were concerned with the private funding influencing additional requirements jeopardizing local control decisions. Some policymakers, like superintendents, were concerned that private funds might not be sustained from year to year.
Qualified teachers. Qualified teachers were discussed by all groups. Superintendents noted a lack of licensed early childhood teachers in rural areas. SBOE members expressed a need to have highly qualified early childhood teachers. Policymakers cited adequate numbers of elementary teachers in rural communities who could teach young children. Qualifications were less important to policymakers on condition that early childhood instructors had a teaching license. Professional development and ongoing training was an essential need for all groups with regard to early childhood education programs.

Transportation. In rural areas, transportation was noted as a challenging factor for early childhood education. Legal requirements for safety restraints posed concerns due to the additional expense of purchasing the equipment needed. Logistical concerns included the distance to an attendance center for young children in districts covering large geographic areas. If parents had to be responsible for transportation it might adversely affect participation. Superintendents noted a need for additional funding for transportation in rural areas to facilitate attendance in sustaining an early childhood education program.

Facilities. The perceptions of participants were most rural communities could locate facilities for an early childhood program. Districts with declining enrollment indicated facilities were available. Policymakers noted lack of facilities that could meet requirements for small children as a potential problem.

Collective Support for Early Childhood Education

Findings indicated a strong support for early childhood programs in rural areas among those interviewed for this study. All participants recognized the need for early interventions but had differing views of who should provide the instruction and where the funding would come from. Children four years old were recognized as the age to start early childhood services in
rural areas. Services for three year old children gained some support, but not all participants acknowledged this age needed formal early education unless specialized services were identified or the home situation was deemed unsuitable. Participants supported early interventions for students identified for special services regardless of age. There was a collective support from all groups for early childhood education to make programs available to all rural children. Required attendance for three and four year old children was a concern for most elected policymakers. Policymakers favored voluntary attendance, whereas superintendents preferred stronger attendance requirements and possible screening requirements to ensure children who needed services got them. The role of policy learning within the subsystem was not only exemplified in all groups that participated, nonetheless policy learning also took place from the process of this study.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Implications

The final chapter of the study reviews the research problem, delivers conclusions analyzed through the theoretical framework of Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), and provides implications for advancing early childhood policy development in rural Kansas. The theoretical framework used as a lens applied to these findings was the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2013). Through this framework, the study makes sense of what occurred from influences that affected early childhood education policy in Kansas with Senators, House of Representatives members, State Board of Education members, advocacy groups, and superintendents.

Research Problem Revisited

Although research findings have shown strong correlations between early childhood interventions and positive results impacting student achievement, not all communities in rural Kansas benefit from state-funded early childhood programs. Even though the benefits of early childhood programs are well-known, programs are difficult to establish, fully implement for all students, and sustain within rural communities (Mann & Williams, 2011b). Early childhood education is generally supported and valued in rural communities but are not always available (Temple, 2009). Even though a universal approach costs more, the added benefits are likely to far exceed the added costs as universal public preschool education is likely to produce far greater economic benefits than an income-targeted approach (Barnett, 2010). However, in the current political climate in which Kansas state legislators have cut funding for K-12 education, it is even more challenging to advocate for funding of early childhood education programs in rural areas. Kansas early childhood advocates have attempted to exert pressure on legislators to fund
programs, but they have had little success in persuading legislators to make early childhood education a priority.

The purpose of this study was to understand what and who influences the development of early childhood education policy and legislative funding in Kansas. The study sought to understand the political environment and how state elected officials, superintendents, and advocacy groups affect policy recommendations in early childhood opportunities in rural Kansas school districts. I will also discuss areas to which the relationship between the school district, elected officials, and advocacy groups could be strengthened to increase early educational opportunities for students.

**Conclusions**

This study brought together disparate data and similar views of five groups associated with policy development in early childhood education in rural Kansas. As confirmed in the theoretical framework, policy development of early childhood education in Kansas has developed slowly, but an increased interest was noted with elected officials as presented in the findings. The conclusions are organized through the lens of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). The ACF is composed on five foundational premises (Sabatier, 1999). This study relied upon the empirical basis for the importance of early childhood education as the scientific information. Second, a time perspective of ten years or more was required to understand policy change. Third, the policy subsystem (defined by policy topic, geographic scope, and influencing actors) was the primary unit of analysis. Fourth, the set of policy subsystem actors is lengthened beyond the traditional members to include officials from several levels of state government, possibly including consultants, specialists, and Kansas State Department of Education officials regarding their potential influence on early childhood education policy and funding. Fifth,
policies and programs can be viewed as interpretations of beliefs. The findings in chapter 4 will be examined through these ACF components.

**Early Childhood Education Subsystem**

The policy subsystem as defined by policy topic, geographic scope, and influencing actors was the primary unit of analysis (University of Colorado Denver College of Public Affairs, 2014). Early childhood education was the policy topic, rural Kansas was the geographical scope, and the influencing actors were elected policymakers, advocacy groups, and superintendents. According to the ACF model, networks of actors learn how to best play the political game to achieve early childhood policy objectives (Cooper et al., 2004).

**Subsystem actors.** Policy actors must act within the policy subsystem in order to understand the technical aspects of a topic, its context, and its geographical application. On the level of the subsystem, the policy actor has the greatest chance to produce change (University of Colorado Denver College of Public Affairs, 2014). The set of policy subsystem actors also expanded beyond the traditional members to include officials from all levels of government and consultants (Weible et al., 2009). Key actors within this study from different arenas and institutions had limited interactions with each other. For example, advocacy group representatives interacted with policymakers and the Kansas State Department of Education, but they did not interact with Superintendents.

**Early childhood education coalitions.** Although policymakers conveyed support for early childhood education, there was little evidence of building coalitions to push for a policy to fund early childhood education in rural Kansas. A Senator in this study did identify the need to build education coalitions within policymakers’ ranks. A limited number of subsystem actors worked at developing support mechanisms through policy learning that assisted early childhood
policymakers to build coalitions. Two members of the House of Representatives, two Senators, and two SBOE members presented information in support of building coalitions mainly between advocacy groups and other policymakers to support early childhood education. Subsystem policymakers seek out other policymakers they perceive to fall within their own early childhood education secondary beliefs and possibly core beliefs to share information. This was illustrated by a Senator who said “I listen to policymakers that also support education and try to develop coalitions that we can build upon.” The role of advocacy groups and the outcomes of their efforts in early childhood were perceived differently by participants.

Although most participants did not note active coalitions, after the interviews were completed, correspondence with advocacy group representatives indicated several early childhood education groups were organizing a coherent legislative agenda. Although coalitions were not frequently noted, this was a sign of advocacy groups working together for a legislative platform.

Participants had mixed perceptions regarding the influence advocacy groups had on early childhood policy. State Board of Education members related they had positive relationships with advocacy groups and even saw them as partners. As noted above, SBOE members sought them out for information including an expressed need for their knowledge of research relevant to early childhood initiatives. SBOE members utilized advocacy groups to perform the groundwork and to communicate proposals. Some House of Representatives and Senators utilized advocacy groups for needed policy information. Policymakers who displayed knowledge of researched based practices had positive relationships with advocacy groups.

There was no evidence of strong coalitions for early childhood education advancement in rural areas. Gaps were present between geographical locations of advocacy groups’ offices to
rural areas along with communication gaps between early childhood advocacy groups and superintendents in rural areas.

**Long Term Time Perspective to Understand Policy Process and Change**

Early childhood policy in Kansas has developed slowly over the past decade. Sabatier (2009) and colleagues argue that policy change needs to be observed over a decade or more to find out how policy analysis shapes the agenda and learning takes place. Early childhood education in Kansas was studied through the ACF lenses and the effects of policy development over the long term time frame from the start of the first initiative to current program availability for all children. A key dimension to the framework is that the policy actors learn over time, what is referred to in this study as policy learning (John, 2013). Evidence found in this study indicated an early childhood subsystem functioning throughout challenging economic times in Kansas, although, some participants in all groups were unaware that early childhood education in Kansas rural areas were not supported by state funded initiatives.

**Survival mode.** The early childhood education subsystem in Kansas has been under pressure to hold onto current levels of funding over the past years during statewide budget cuts in K-12 public education. Advocacy groups expressed their efforts during these trying times were to essentially hold on to what funding they had. The tobacco settlement funds were under pressure to be utilized elsewhere; therefore pro-education advocacy groups were fighting to maintain these funding streams. The examples found in this study gave some rationale to the lack of movement for additional funding over recent years in the early childhood education subsystem. The early childhood education subsystem has been in a survival mode to maintain current levels of funding.
Central in this study was the empirical basis regarding the importance of early childhood education and also where and who policymakers sought scientific and technical information. The participants in the study received information from different people and groups. Scientific and technical information is important for understanding subsystem affairs (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2013). The early childhood subsystem in Kansas involves issues difficult to describe and explain in terms of their potential effects on policy proposals. For the purpose of this study, the scientific information was the empirical basis for the importance of early childhood education and its long-term benefits to society. Participants tended to filter or ignore information that challenged their beliefs and readily accepted information that bolstered their beliefs. For example, some elected policymakers trusted advocacy groups’ researched information about the long-term benefits of early childhood education and others did not. Their use of perceptual filters meant they tended to discount even high quality technical information if it conflicted with their beliefs and they accepted highly uncertain technical information if it supported their beliefs (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2013).

**Sources of scientific and technical information.** Sources of scientific and technical information uncovered in this study included the Legislative Research Department, Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), and empirical research. The Legislative Research Department is a nonpartisan agency that provided support services for the Kansas Legislature. The Department provides objective research and fiscal analysis for the Kansas Legislature (Kansas Legislative Research Department, 2014). Although empirical evidence was not noted, the legislative research department served as a source of technical information to House of
Representative members and Senators and the material its staff members prepared for individual legislators was confidential.

KSDE served as a new resource for both scientific and technical information for some study participants. Some policymakers utilized information from KSDE that included data and research recognized by the department. SBOE members utilized KSDE more often than other groups in the study. SBOE had immediate access to KSDE and staff. KSDE provided superintendents with more technical information regarding potential early childhood policies and potential impacts to students in their district. Policymakers noted KSDE researchers provided them with important information towards developing policy. For example, for one House member, research provided through KSDE that addressed the effectiveness of early childhood interventions closing achievement gaps was important technical information.

Advocacy groups used empirical research to shore up their position. Specific studies were recognized by these participants. For example, early childhood advocacy groups cited brain development research and noted it directly impacts three and four year old children. Advocacy groups also recognized costs versus benefits associated with educating young children from past studies. One advocacy group utilized economic benefits from research to bolster their position and support of early childhood in the business sector. Research played an important role for some policymakers, more often with SBOE members than legislators.

**General knowledge of recognized research.** Some participants noted and recognized empirical research in this study regarding the benefits of early childhood education but did not cite specific studies. For example, SBOE members recognized research more often than other policymakers, but other than staying up on readings, this information was not being conveyed to other policymakers. Another example was a House member who recognized research existed
with regard to achievement gaps when comparing children but this information did not expand to other notable benefits for children in rural areas. Most participants recognized and had general knowledge of research or data available, but this information was not noted to drive policy decisions.

**Non-scientific and non-technical information: Personal perspectives.** A notable finding was where and who elected officials go to for information affecting the development of early childhood education policy. In spite of the abundance of scientific and technical information in published studies supporting the long-term benefits of early childhood education, most policymakers did not rely upon this information. Instead they sought the perspectives and opinions of people they knew and trusted, such as educators, parents, and their colleagues. House of Representatives, Senators, and SBOE members sought out specific people for information influencing early childhood education. Notable people that influenced early childhood policy decisions included professional educators, legislative colleagues, the legislative research department, and parents and community members.

**Professional educators.** Professional educators had abundant influence on policymakers, perhaps even more than they realized. The relationships developed between policymakers and education professionals were highly regarded. As one policymaker illustrated “You talk to people you know and trust” in the education field. Trust was regarded as important when gathering information pertinent to early childhood education policy implications. Those trusted educational professionals carried a great deal of influence with policymakers, although educational professionals did not extend influence beyond requested interactions. Those education professionals noted in the study were frequently sought out by policymakers and found to have more influence on early childhood policy than other areas and people.
Rural superintendents were also trusted sources of information regarding early childhood education, and this study found their roles were significant in contributing to policy development with SBOE members and some House and Senate members. Superintendents did not link advocacy groups to successful policy development that supported rural areas. Other than testimony given to each superintendent’s board of education, superintendents were not active in early childhood education coalitions outside of their district to foster and support efforts to fund early childhood initiatives. Policymakers, especially SBOE members, utilized superintendents for policy information.

**Parents.** Parents served as a source of information to several policymakers. Parents were perceived as important community members in rural areas and key to successful early childhood programs. Parental perceptions and involvement were important to elected policymakers and some superintendents. Respecting the decisions of stay at home parents was important to several participant groups. Study participants also recognized the importance of community and parental buy-in for adequate numbers attending programs in rural areas. Some rural areas were challenged to have adequate numbers of children to justify a program, therefore parental input and support was vital to study participants.

**Legislative colleagues.** Policymakers trusted other legislative colleagues for policy decisions in early childhood education. For those participants who were not using research, they used trusted colleagues for technical information. Some members of the House of Representative and Senators sought out colleagues for policy information. A significant finding of this study was state legislators identified their colleagues serving on the education committee and specifically identified chair or leaders on the education committee as “go to” sources for relevant policy information.
Policy Beliefs

Present in this study were three tiered levels of belief in the ACF that affected political behavior (Weible et al., 2009). Those three levels of policy beliefs included deep core beliefs, policy core beliefs, and secondary beliefs.

**Deep core beliefs.** At the top of the belief system lie deep core beliefs, which include subsystem policy actors’ views on the role of government, beliefs about human nature, or priorities regarding who should participate in government. Deep core beliefs revealed in this study were beliefs about funding early childhood education, which stemmed from participants’ positions on additional taxing, shifting priorities of current available funds, to addressing revenues to fully implement a universal program. These deep core beliefs are organized into conservative beliefs, moderate beliefs, and liberal beliefs. Most participants expressed moderate deep core beliefs.

Conservative policy core beliefs communicated around early childhood were local control, the limited role of government in supporting and funding programs, the belief that children should stay at home with parents until they reach formal school age, and the viewpoint of early childhood as economic development. Deep core beliefs were recognized in participants when funding early childhood programs were discussed. Additional taxes to fund new or existing programs found resistance from conservative participants. For example, many participants with conservative perspectives placed the need for early childhood as a local decision and they believed if the need was recognized, the local community would find a way locally to “make it happen.” Participants who expressed these beliefs were two SBOE members, two Senators, two House of Representatives, and one adversarial advocacy group representative.
Participants with moderate deep core beliefs recognized the importance and need for early childhood education in rural areas, but they expressed uncertainty with where the resources would be generated. For example a policymaker that supported early childhood stated “at some point we need to find a dedicated funding source.” Participants with moderate level beliefs in this study also recognized the importance of early childhood education research. Moderate deep core beliefs were held by one SBOE member, three Senators, five House of Representatives, and five superintendents.

Deep core beliefs for liberal participants were an expanded role of state government to sponsor and fund early childhood and the belief that the government should take responsibility for ensuring all communities have access to early childhood. Those with liberal beliefs recognized the need for early childhood programs, and believed the state had responsibility for fully funding the program. They were committed to finding state resources for early childhood education. For example, a policymaker stated “the legislature needs to step up and do more especially in rural districts so that rural districts can give their young kids, their young children the same opportunities.” Participants with liberal deep core beliefs were one SBOE member, one Senator, and three advocacy group representatives.

**Policy core beliefs.** Policy core beliefs tend to be subsystem-wide in scope and are the foundation for forming coalitions, establishing alliances, and coordinating activities among subsystem members. Policy core beliefs are resistant to change, but are more malleable than deep core beliefs (University of Colorado Denver College of Public Affairs, 2014). This tier of beliefs is more likely to adjust in response to verification and refutation from new experiences and information. Policy core beliefs in this study included support for parent choice and voluntary early childhood participation. Most policymakers believed there was a need for early
initiatives preparing for kindergarten success. Policymakers generally supported making early childhood education programs available to all rural children, however, they believed such programs should be voluntary and not require attendance for three and four year old children.

Advocacy group representatives and those policymakers that worked together to improve the subsystem had strong beliefs that were not likely to change about the benefits of early childhood education. Those policymakers that utilized advocacy groups trusted the information advocacy groups provided. Participants displayed policy core beliefs predictive of the level of trust that coalition member’s exhibited (Lubell, 2007). The level of trust acknowledged between some policymakers and advocacy groups allowed for information to be more accessible for those policymakers. As recognized in another study, policy beliefs and the process of policy learning within the subsystem were confirmed with some participants regarding how advocacy groups and policymakers acted together (Lubell, Scholz, Berardo, & Robins, 2012).

These subsystem actors were also flexible to make necessary adjustments if it would result in increased funding for all young children across Kansas to increase their learning opportunities. House of Representatives members, Senators, State Board of Education members, and advocacy groups supported voluntary participation in early childhood programs. Some superintendents supported required attendance along with required evaluations for all children to assess where they are compared to where they need to be prior to kindergarten. Superintendents supported required attendance and funding for children identified for special services in early childhood. According to policymaker participants, public opinion generally favored voluntary attendance with the decision left up to the parents.

Secondary beliefs. The secondary beliefs are more substantively and geographically narrow in scope and are more likely to change over time than the other belief levels. Secondary
beliefs in this study included the lack of support from community members, stakeholders, and parents about the benefits of early childhood education. This area had the greatest opportunity to change over time when parents and community members learn about the benefits of early childhood education, therefore influencing policymakers regarding funding decisions. Other examples of secondary beliefs included detailed rules and budgetary decisions within early childhood education. This belief level also entertained areas affected by the research on the benefits of early childhood education. Policymakers who utilized research were more likely to adjust their beliefs in response to verification of results and experiences from educators and people in the field. Secondary beliefs are most susceptible to change in response to new information and events (Weible & Sabatier, 2006). For example, those policymakers that utilized research recognized the academic “gaps” and also the benefits of early childhood education to kindergarten readiness. Therefore, if policymakers find the early childhood research convincing, they are likely to change their views about the importance of proposing or supporting early childhood education policy.

All study participants identified state funding as the first area needed in order to sustain early childhood education programs in rural communities. Utilizing the current K-12 funding formula was frequently discussed by participants. Students enrolled would attain the percentage of Full Time Equivalence (FTE) that would qualify for funding in the current K-12 funding formula in Kansas. All students would be counted instead of those students who qualify through an annual grant application process. Although participants acknowledged the need for state funding, not all participants agreed about how much funding to provide and where the funds should come from. Policy beliefs played a significant role as it concerned funding, which is the backbone of implications for a universal early childhood education policy in Kansas. Belief
systems, however, are still the primary theoretical factor that structures coalition membership and subsystems (Leifeld, 2013).

**External Shocks**

External shocks include change in governing coalitions, public opinion, and other outputs from other subsystems (Sabatier, 1999). External shocks were not present in the early childhood education subsystem. However, due to the amount of influence parents and community members can exert, they could provide external shocks by changing public opinions in the subsystem. Potential external shocks from public opinion in this study could come from parents and community members’ recognition of the benefits of early childhood education in rural communities. Nowlin (2011) found that public opinion is the foundation of the policy topography. If the public is uninformed in early childhood education, any potential funding policies will have challenges without shocks occurring in the subsystem.

Other potential external shocks in this study included participants’ perceptions of parents and community members, who were frequently noted to influence policymakers. These noted perceptions were not causing shocks to the policy development in the subsystem, rather influencing some policymaker’s perceptions of the importance of rural early childhood education.

An active interest in funding early childhood education in Kansas could consequently create both internal and external shocks around the issue of attendance, based upon the findings. Overall, external shocks had a great amount of potential to occur but as a whole, external shocks were not occurring in the subsystem.
**Internal Shocks**

Internal shocks occur inside the territorial and/or the topical areas of the policy subsystem and are more likely to be affected by subsystem actors (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2013). Depending on a policymaker’s position on a proposed early childhood policy, these types of interactions could serve as an internal shock or external shock within the early childhood subsystem. At the time of this study, little was happening within the subsystem as it concerned early childhood education policy. There was some action being considered, such as moving funding around from K-12 to early childhood or from within the tobacco lawsuit funds, which could become an internal shock (Jones & Jenkins-Smith, 2009).

Action taken by legislative members through the process of building coalitions within legislative ranks can cause both internal and external shocks. These actors were starting to form coalitions, yet did not provide shocks within the subsystem. Instead advocacy group members attempted to hammer out compromises to better their overall position in the early childhood policy arena to hang onto what funding was already available. Internal events can also occur within the subsystem and are expected to highlight failures in current subsystem practices (Weible et al., 2009). These types of actions can also cause external shocks from community members and parents. Overall, internal shocks were only noted when discussing the tobacco settlement funds and where those funds should be distributed. Although internal and external shocks were not present in the subsystem, other barriers to sustain early childhood in rural areas were identified.

**Collective Support of Early Childhood Education**

The Kansas Pre-School program initiatives started in 2006 in Kansas. The support since the start of these initiatives has grown with policymakers. According to the ACF, policy
development requires ten or more years to develop and understand policy change (Weible et al., 2009). Collective support for early childhood education was evident in all interviews and illustrated an increased awareness and acknowledgment of the need to provide early childhood education to all children in Kansas.

As noted in Advocacy Coalition Framework, Sabatier (1999), policies are open to interpretation and multiple perspectives as people try to come to terms with them. Because there are so many activities going on simultaneously in legislative policy, many possible meanings typically have to be synthesized, and different meanings develop from stakeholders who have contrasting perspectives and interests. Policymakers in this study communicated a general knowledge and support of early childhood education. The notable findings indicate a strong correlation to a link to this support and knowledge to ACF’s timeline for an understanding of current early childhood policy along with a recognized support for rural opportunities. Policy learning within the subsystem from key actors has slowly impacted this movement. The topic of how to fund a universal early childhood program available to all Kansas children was gridlocked within belief systems noted in ACF (Weible et al., 2009).

**Implications**

The findings and conclusions from this study indicate early childhood education certainly has a critical role to play in assisting a child’s readiness for kindergarten. However, in this Midwestern state, the early childhood subsystem is at a standstill.

In this section, I propose a number of policy implications, intended to provide district leaders, policymakers, and early childhood advocacy groups with suggestions and guidance that can facilitate greater efficacy and sustainability of early childhood education in rural Kansas. Policy endures a minimum of ten years to develop through a combination of scientific
information along with internal and external shocks (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2013). Several components of early childhood are already in place as it relates to implementation of the programs through the guidance of the Kansas State Department of Education, and therefore poised to move forward with initiatives in a broader concept for rural communities in Kansas.

Collaboration of Actors to Advance Rural Early Childhood Initiatives and Funding

Rural schools are becoming more complex with increasing rates of poverty, diversity, and special needs students (Strange et al., 2012). Actors identified in this study played significant roles in developing policies to fund rural early childhood education. Actors were observed to operate independently of each other in many cases, therefore not providing a united movement. This section outlines implications for opportunities to work together for the betterment of children in rural communities.

Collaboration between actors within the subsystem of early childhood education in rural communities would assist efforts to provide early childhood education to all rural children. Actors relevant to this issue included advocacy groups, professional educators, community stakeholders, and elected policymakers. A unified front between advocacy groups, superintendents, and SBOE members to collaborate on policy information and policy positions would assist House of Representatives members and Senators to sort out pertinent information. Scientific and technical information becomes an important resource for coalition members aimed at a variety of uses (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2013). Defining the role of actors would also assist in promoting early childhood education in rural areas.

Professional educators tend to underestimate their influence with early childhood education policymakers. Findings indicated a strong relationship exists between professional educators and elected policymakers. Study participants perceived a trusted relationship as an
important influence for policy information. Teachers, administrators, and superintendents were commonly sought out for early childhood policy information. A key dimension of ACF is that participants learn over time (John, 2013). Professional educators’ influence with policymakers can create an upsurge of policy learning over time to key subsystem stakeholders, especially elected policymakers.

**Shocking the Subsystem**

The early childhood subsystem was found to be in survival mode due to funding cuts in Kansas in recent years. The subsystem has not had movement due to this survival mode environment. If a funding movement is going to occur, internal and external shocks to the subsystem must take place. Professional educators, especially those early childhood and primary teachers must actively shock the subsystem through a combination of advocacy and providing testimony to elected policymakers. They need to collect and share data about needs of young children. As evident in this study, the early childhood education subsystem in Kansas has not experienced internal or external shocks in recent years. Early childhood educators were not sending internal shocks to policymakers about the academic and social gaps children arrive with in kindergarten. Many of the participants noted children with needs due to economic disadvantages should have a higher priority for early childhood education. Children’s lack of readiness for kindergarten was not producing internal shocks to the subsystem.

Policy learning in early childhood education has future opportunities due to the current political landscape. At the federal level, President Obama’s recommendation for additional funding has brought attention to early childhood education (The White House, 2014). At the state and local levels, both internal and external shocks must take place in order to draw attention to the importance of early childhood education. Internal shocks would include the urgency to act
on funding early childhood to decrease the achievement gaps children arrive in kindergarten with. For example, a greater understanding and support from professional educators could move the subsystem in a direction to address the social and academic needs of children before kindergarten. Another example of a potential internal shock could be generated through all pro-early childhood advocacy groups developing one coalition with one voice to policymakers utilizing research and available data to identify social and academic gaps in young children. A strong advocacy coalition reaching out to rural communities could have positive results for a better understanding of the benefits of early childhood education.

External shocks at the state and local level could play an important role in future funding of early childhood education. For example, professional educators play an important role by their influence on rural community members, parents, and policymakers. The role of policy learning by professional educators will be necessary in the early childhood subsystem to influence public perceptions and gain support for policies to fund early childhood education. In the ACF, the view of the role of public opinion in policy change is evolving (Shanahan, McBeth, & Hathaway, 2011). Additional support from K-12 education, parents, and community members in rural areas could generate external shocks to the subsystem. Also at the state level, Kansas Governor Brownback has supported additional funding for all-day kindergarten. Early childhood coalitions have actively offered supportive scientific and technical information to policymakers to justify the need for these funds in early childhood education programs (USA/Kansas, 2014).

Subsystem movement due to shocks could create attention from the media. Utilizing media attention could have a positive impact for rural Kansas children. President Obama’s position on early childhood education has also caught the attention of the media. According to the ACF, the media is an active member of an advocacy coalition (Shanahan et al., 2011). The
time is right to build stronger coalitions for productive discussions about the needs of children and addressing the academic and social skills needed to build a foundation where children are better prepared for kindergarten. Strong coalitions support and provide policy learning over time; therefore more stakeholders will have a better understanding of the benefits of early childhood education and state funding necessary to sustain opportunities for all children in rural areas.

Marketing Early Childhood Education Initiatives to Shock the Subsystem

There is a need to market the benefits of early childhood education to educators, parents, community members, and elected officials. Advocacy groups need to strengthen their role as subsystem actors within early childhood education. One way to strengthen their role is collaborate with each other on early childhood policy positions to pursue a unified stance on early childhood education. This would create less confusion when communicating with policymakers. Policymakers perceived advocacy groups to be requesting specific funding needs for numerous areas of interest. This approach turned some policymakers away from early childhood discussions. If advocacy groups would create a united approach that articulates the benefits of early childhood education for three and four year old children, doing so would assist in building confidence with policymakers and build upon supporting subsystem actors. The benefits of early childhood continues to grow in research findings and advocacy groups need to capitalize on this knowledge base without overwhelming policymakers with large amounts of information. In a study of the use of policy-relevant information by state legislators, it was found that the average length of used information was 2.91 pages. Advocacy groups can make information more attractive to policymakers by providing policy reports that build on more technical documents that are clear and brief (Gormley, 2011). Participating actors in a
subsystem must recognize credible technical information and share it clearly and as briefly as possible to maintain policymakers’ attention.

Early childhood advocacy groups must stay active within the subsystem because adversarial advocacy groups are working against additional government involvement that includes funding. Although findings indicated adversarial advocacy groups did not express opposition to early childhood education, they did form lines to advocate against additional funding and additional taxes created for government programs. Policymakers must sort through this information from advocacy groups and determine what information is valid or verified within their policy beliefs. Policymakers may look for ways of evaluating the level of trust they should place on different forms of evidence that are claimed to support or undercut policy proposals (Debray, Scott, Lubienski, & Jabbar, 2014). Therefore, scientific and technical information will be central to early childhood advocacy coalitions when approaching policy proposals.

Credible advocacy groups were characterized as those who presented the effects of potential policies from all viewpoints. One viewpoint with a mission statement that supports the vision of early childhood education advocacy groups would offer a central focus for policymakers. An established protocol for advocacy group representatives that addresses proper communication to develop relationships with policymakers could strengthen their role in the policy arena and gain trust within the early childhood subsystem. Policy learning that is developed through consistent accurate data could build trust to coalition actors receiving information from advocacy groups.

Early childhood advocacy groups were not perceived to have an impact in rural areas, with an absence of advocacy groups in rural communities noted. Advocacy groups must reach
out and develop relationships with educators in rural communities. A connection between advocacy groups and professional educators can assist to establish working relationships with community stakeholders that include elected policymakers in rural areas. Advocacy groups have several backgrounds of interests that have potential to connect with rural communities. Business sectors could be influenced by advocacy groups currently present in larger populated areas. Professional ties to chambers of commerce in rural areas would connect additional interests and recognition of community needs for early childhood initiatives.

Additional support to fund all young children has been difficult to establish in Kansas. Even if policymakers recognize the research findings about the benefits of early childhood, funding serves as the biggest challenge. In other studies, funding has been shown to make a difference in education programs. On average, aggregate measures of per pupil spending are positively associated with improved or higher student outcomes. The size of this effect is larger than in others and, in some cases, additional funding appears to matter more for some students than others. A more equitable and adequate allocation of financial inputs to schooling provides a necessary underlying condition for improving the equity and adequacy of outcomes (Baker, 2012). In North Carolina, the state's investment of $2,200 per student for the early childhood programs is generating solid returns (Ladd, Muschkin, & Dodge, 2014). Available research from states that tested early childhood education programs provides data results for advocacy coalitions and policymakers. Kansas would benefit from examining other states that implemented early childhood programs and has data that supports social and academic readiness skills essential for kindergarten. A united strategy to market these benefits and justify additional funding will increase and continue to build stronger coalitions within the subsystem.
Strengthening Community Buy-in Through Partnerships

A potential solution for early childhood education sustainability in rural Kansas is community partnerships. Although not all participants were supportive of private influence on early childhood education, many groups expressed an interest to connect community resources to advance early childhood education in rural Kansas. Community partnerships were perceived more favorably when facilities were a part of this relationship. Due to declining populations in many small communities, churches and other buildings were available according to many participants. Community partnerships could serve as a source for allowing additional community buy-in for early childhood education to take hold in rural communities.

Community partnerships should be a shared approach between K-12 programs and community resources so that the end result is to provide early childhood opportunities in rural areas. School superintendents are respected leaders in rural communities and are sought out for information regarding early childhood education policy. Community partnerships in rural communities have potential for success with superintendent’s providing the leadership to collaborate with community leaders and resources. Partnerships require highly effective, authentic, and responsive leaders who can bring all partners together to create solutions in context.

Community partnerships should include a shared goal for the common good, transparency of action, and global societal issues relevant to all stakeholders. According to Rowe (2013), partnerships should also provide recognition of partners' roles and ensuring appropriate representation, attitudes and perceptions concerning potential bias or self-interest, appropriate boundaries for investors in the research, and achievement of mutual respect and trust in the partnership process (Rowe et al., 2013).
Strengthening Relationships to Enhance Rural Kansas

Notable findings indicated gaps in efforts to advance early childhood education in rural areas. Advocacy groups need to make a better connection with school officials, especially early childhood and kindergarten teachers in rural areas. Superintendents must also make efforts to develop strong ties with advocacy groups. Advocacy groups are passionate about early childhood initiatives but they are not connecting with the needs of all rural communities. Superintendents must lead these initiatives and reach out and welcome advocacy groups into school districts. Superintendents could also provide important community information for advocates in supporting communication that improves community involvement.

Increasing teacher relationships with elected policymakers would benefit early childhood education. Policymakers generally trusted and looked up to professional educators. Primary level elementary teachers that include kindergarten, first grade, and second grade were found to influence elected policymakers with early childhood information. Trusted relationships with professional educators had positive dividends. According to Lubell (2007), the structure of policy trust is heavily influenced by the political values and policy-core beliefs. Superintendents making efforts to build relationships with SBOE members also gained positive dividends. Superintendents should make greater efforts with House of Representatives members and Senators to build coalitions in early childhood policies. Invitations to policymakers to visit attendance centers for young children could pay great dividends. Professional educators’ testimonies had positive results with most policymakers. Superintendents should allow and promote teachers to provide testimony during legislative hearings to improve policy learning due to a greater understanding of the needs children with underdeveloped skills.
Building stronger coalitions through actors in early childhood education subsystem could greatly enhance political support to fund rural early childhood education. Findings of this study found a subsystem that some actors were unaware early childhood education was not available to all rural children. Findings supported signs of increased interests for early childhood education with policymakers. This explains the signs that policy learning has taken place over time since the implementation of current state initiatives but shocks have not continued to move the subsystem. Unification of the actors in the subsystem would promote an increased level of support for rural communities. A universal early childhood education initiative for all children in Kansas would have greater possibilities to sustain if the coalitions within the subsystem are active by means of creating shocks over time.

**Early Childhood Sustainability in Rural Kansas**

This study examined how early childhood education programs could be implemented and sustained in rural areas of Kansas. Study participants shared their perceptions of how rural communities can facilitate and ensure all children in Kansas have the opportunity to attend an early childhood program at ages three and four. Issues and concerns they believe need to be addressed in order to sustain early childhood in rural Kansas included funding, community buy-in, facilities, transportation, and qualified teachers. Participants identified community buy-in was essential to influencing policy at the local and state levels. Participants also discussed issues, concerns, and philosophical differences about when and if young children should attend school, and differences of opinions and beliefs about what early childhood should consists of, to include social interactions verses academic preparations. Interests for kindergarten readiness but not a highly structured program, rather, developmentally appropriate with an emphasis on social
skills and play time were important to some participants. Several participants perceived that many residents of rural areas did not recognize the benefits of early childhood education.

Findings indicated that facilities were available in most rural communities, although not all facilities were appropriate for the age of the child and would need to be modified to meet their needs. For some participants, offering early childhood education programs in rural areas, it was important for those children eligible to attend. Due to smaller populations, filling a classroom with students to be cost effective could be a challenge if all eligible students are not attending. Likewise, transportation plays an important role for rural areas. School districts not offering transportation have greater risks of not having enough students to justify a program.

Available teachers were hard to find in some rural areas of Kansas according to superintendents. Superintendents and advocacy groups were concerned with finding teachers licensed in early childhood to fill vacancies. House of Representatives members and Senators were concerned with having a licensed teacher but not requiring a teacher to hold an early childhood license. Participants also identified areas to address these barriers to assisting the implementation and sustainability of early childhood education in rural Kansas.

The study illustrates the difficulties with implementing and funding early childhood education in rural Kansas. Through this study, rural Kansas school participants have recognized the need for early childhood education. In spite of the challenges in an unstable policy and economic environment, rural early childhood education in Kansas has an opportunity to move forward. Recognition of the importance of early childhood education and stronger early childhood education coalitions will be necessary for legislative support to fund rural areas.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Michael Argabright and I represent Wichita State University as a doctoral student in the field of educational leadership. I appreciate your willingness to assist me in my dissertation research. This study is to examine the perceptions of policymakers, early childhood advocates, and superintendents with regards to what influences state funding for early childhood education in rural Kansas. You have been selected because of your position as an elected policymaker, early childhood advocate, or rural superintendent. Please keep in mind this study is seeking your perception of what influences policies to fund early childhood education in rural Kansas.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few procedures for our conversation. Although we will be on a first name basis, no names will be used when I report the results of this session. You can be assured of complete confidentiality. I will audio record our conversation for response clarity towards accurate data analysis to report findings. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I assure this audio recording will be destroyed after the completion of this study.

This session will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

Policymakers and Superintendents Interview Questions

1) Please tell me your name, title, years of experience within your respected area, and what area of Kansas and town/city you live in.

2) What is your background in early childhood education programs?

3) Who do you go to for accurate information when developing education policies?

4) What should EC in rural Kansas look like?
At what age do you think formal education should start with children before kindergarten?

What would you identify as the critical factors in sustaining early childhood education programs in rural Kansas school districts?

Why do you think early childhood is not available to all Kansas kids?

What influences your decisions when developing policies in early childhood?

What role do advocacy groups play with decisions for early childhood education?

What do you think are barriers to implementing early childhood programs in rural Kansas?

Where do you think funding for early childhood programs should come from?

What early childhood education opportunities are created with current funds available in your area(s)?

What is an adequate (FTE) funding level for early childhood programs for three and four year old children?

What early childhood components are missing for a quality early childhood program in your area(s)?

What areas of early childhood education have not been discussed that is relevant to this study?

Advocacy Group Representative Interview Questions

Please tell me your name, title, years of experience within your respected area, and what area of Kansas and town/city you live in.

What is your understanding of research based best practices in early childhood education programs and development? Is there an area more important than others?
3) What should EC in rural Kansas look like?

4) At what age do you think formal education should start with children before kindergarten?

5) What would you identify as the critical factors in sustaining early childhood education programs in rural Kansas school districts?

6) With the research findings demonstrating the importance of early childhood, why do you think early childhood is not available to all Kansas kids?

7) What role do advocacy groups play with decisions for early childhood education?

8) What do you think are barriers to implementing early childhood programs in rural Kansas?

9) Where do you think funding for early childhood programs should come from?

10) What early childhood education opportunities are created with current funds available in your area(s)?

11) What is an adequate (FTE) funding level for early childhood programs for three and four year old children?

12) What early childhood components are missing for a quality early childhood program in your area(s)?

13) What areas of early childhood education have not been discussed that is relevant to this study?
Appendix B

Elected Policymakers, Advocacy Groups Representatives, and Superintendent

Personal Interview Consent Form

Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership, Educational and School Psychology
Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142

**Purpose:** You are invited to participate in a study to examine perceptions of what influences state policy development and funding for early childhood education in rural Kansas.

**Participant Selection:** You were selected amongst elected Kansas House of Representatives, Senators, State Board of Education, representatives from early childhood advocacy groups, and superintendents for participation in this study. Approximately 28 individuals have been invited to participate in an interview. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your role as a policymaker or your interest in early childhood education programs. Your participation will consist of a one-to-one interview with me and recorded for data analysis utilized towards the findings of the study.

**Explanation of Procedures:** If you decide to participate, you will be asked to share your perceptions of rural Kansas early childhood education programs in an individual interview. The interview will consist of open-ended questions to seek your perception of state funding, policy, and what influences early childhood programs in rural Kansas. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes and will take place at a time and location convenient for you. With your permission, I would like to audio record our interview so I can create an accurate transcript, which will facilitate data analysis. Approximately 18-28 interviews are planned with elected policymakers, advocacy group representatives, and rural superintendents.

**Discomfort/Risks:** There are no risks, discomforts, or inconveniences expected from your participation in this study. You may skip a question(s) or stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

**Benefits:** The purpose of this study is to provide information related to policymakers, advocacy group representatives, and superintendents on perceptions what influences the development of state policy towards early childhood education in rural Kansas. Additionally, this study hopes to add to the body of knowledge about early childhood education efforts. Results may be published in journals and presented at conferences in order to share what I learn from the study with others.

**Confidentiality:** Any identifiable information obtained in this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Raw data will be maintained in a secure
location, and no identifying information will be used in the final dissertation or subsequent publications. Digital audio recordings will be secured in a password protected file on my computer and deleted at the conclusion of the study. No one other than me and my advisor at Wichita State University will have access to the raw data.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University or myself. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form for your records.

Contact: If you have any questions about this study, please contact Michael Argabright, 620-794-5049 (cell phone) or my advisor Jean Patterson, (316) 978-6392 (office phone). If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007 at (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates you have read the information provided above and have voluntarily decided to participate.

________________________________________ _______________________
Signature of Subject       Date

________________________________________
Print Name

________________________________________
Title or Area of Representation

________________________________________ _______________________
Signature of Witness       Date