



Safety concerns parents

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SPRINGFIELD - A comprehensive child welfare study in the state's third largest city shows almost a third of parents fear for their children's safety and about half have had difficulty providing for their basic needs.

While parents listed quality education as a top challenge, more than half said they were satisfied with the work of teachers in the city.

The numbers come from a survey of parents done by Market Street Research of Northampton as part of the Cherish Every Child Initiative in Springfield. The initiative, a collaborative of health care and social service providers, is attempting to improve the lives of children in the city, which is among the poorest per capita in the state.

The study showed that 30.2 percent of parents of young children feel their children are not safe in their neighborhoods and 23 percent feel they are not safe in school.

But the study showed 59 percent are very satisfied with the quality of education even though providing quality education was ranked by parents as their No. 1 challenge.

Benjamin Rodriguez, program director for the Cherish Every Child project, said it is significant that the survey was done before a series of murders this summer in the city, where a dozen people have been slain this year. The percentage of parents concerned about child safety might have been higher after those crimes, he said.

Interviewed were 202 parents with children under 18 in the home from throughout the city, with the majority located in Mason Square and East Forest Park. The report was issued this month and had a margin of error of 4.1 percent to 6.9 percent.

When asked what their biggest challenges are, safety was the second most mentioned parental concern behind quality education, said Julie Pokela of Market Street Research.

According to the report, one respondent said, "The schools don't teach them what they need to know, they don't follow up, they don't contact parents, they scream at kids."

On the safety issue, a parent said, "Most of the neighborhoods in Springfield aren't that great. It's all full of drug dealers. ... We need affordable and better neighborhoods."

Another said, "There is drugs everywhere. It's just a real bad place to live. You hear gunshots, that's what makes it a bad place to live."

Pokela said that while most parents feel their children are safe in their homes, they are much less confident that their children are safe at school, in the neighborhoods or at day care, with one in five parents concerned about the safety of their children in these locations.

The survey found that Mason Square and Pine Point parents are less likely to feel their children are safe in their home.

"We don't know why parents in those neighborhoods feel the way they do. It could be stray bullets," Pokela said.

In the North End and South End, 46 percent of parents feel their children are not safe in their neighborhoods.

Police Commission Chairman Timothy J. Ryan said he is not surprised with the results.

"Are our neighborhoods as safe as we want them to be?" he said. "No. My sense is that the schools are safe, especially at the elementary school level.

"Fears about safety in the neighborhoods reflect the reality that we face. I would be lying if I said parents should have no concerns."

Despite 31 percent of parents saying the quality of education is the biggest challenge facing them, 59 percent say they are very satisfied. Seventy-one percent said they were very satisfied with the quality of caregivers and teachers.

School Superintendent Joseph P. Burke said it is very encouraging that there is an interest in the quality of education. But he said that while people are satisfied with the education their children are getting, there is a perception about the schools as a whole that is based on what people hear. He said the school system needs to do a better job getting its message out about the good things going on in the schools.

About one-half of the parents interviewed said they were satisfied with the nutrition their children receive, and 93 percent of parents said they are satisfied with the amount of exercise their children get.

Health and Human Services Commissioner Helen R. Caulton-Harris said recent findings show that Springfield has the highest rate of obesity in the state and those numbers include children.

"What this survey may be telling us is that we need to expand our activities, as a community, to make sure that parents know more about what good nutrition is and what beneficial exercise is," she said.

Caulton-Harris also questioned the perception parents have about the health care of their children.

About three-fifths reported that their young children see a dentist for a routine checkup every six months.

"We've just received funding to establish a dental clinic at the Green School from the Oral Health Foundation. We are concerned that children are not getting the dental care they need," Caulton-Harris said.

North End and South End parents said that 54 percent of their children went to the dentist for routine visits once a year.

Caulton-Harris said given the high rate of poverty - 16 percent in Hampden County, according to the U.S. Census bureau - she is not surprised that parents report trouble providing for the basic needs of their children such as seasonal clothing and food.

"Specifically, over one half of parents have experienced difficulty paying for clothing for their young children for the different seasons of the year," the report says, with 14.9 percent frequently experiencing difficulty."

Frank P. Robinson of Partners for a Healthier Community said one of the encouraging things in the report is that more than one-third said they were very interested in participating in parenting programs and about two-fifths are somewhat interested.

Mary E. Walachy, executive director of the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation in Springfield, which funded the initiative, said that it may be that parenting programs have to go into the homes rather than ask the parents to come out. But she said that would be very expensive.

Other major findings include the following:

About two-fifths of parents experienced difficulty providing or arranging for transportation for their young children.

Almost all, 96 percent, reported that their young children see a doctor for a routine checkup at least once a year.

Almost one-half reported that their children are cared for by someone outside the home with three-fifths of these saying their children are cared for by someone else at least eight hours a day.

About three-fifths reported a need for after-school care.

About three-fifths said they watch television with their children regularly and read aloud to them nearly every day.

A plurality, 44 percent, cited The Republican as their preferred source of information about activities, resources and programs for families with young children.

About one-third said when they wanted help from a group, they did not receive it.

Fifty-two percent said knowing where to get help was a problem, and 51 percent said the cost of getting help was a problem.

More than one-fourth think that talking to an authority figure when they disagree would be difficult.

Fifty percent said they had difficulty finding child care for preschool-age children that is affordable.

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