

Northeast Oklahoma Regional Plan

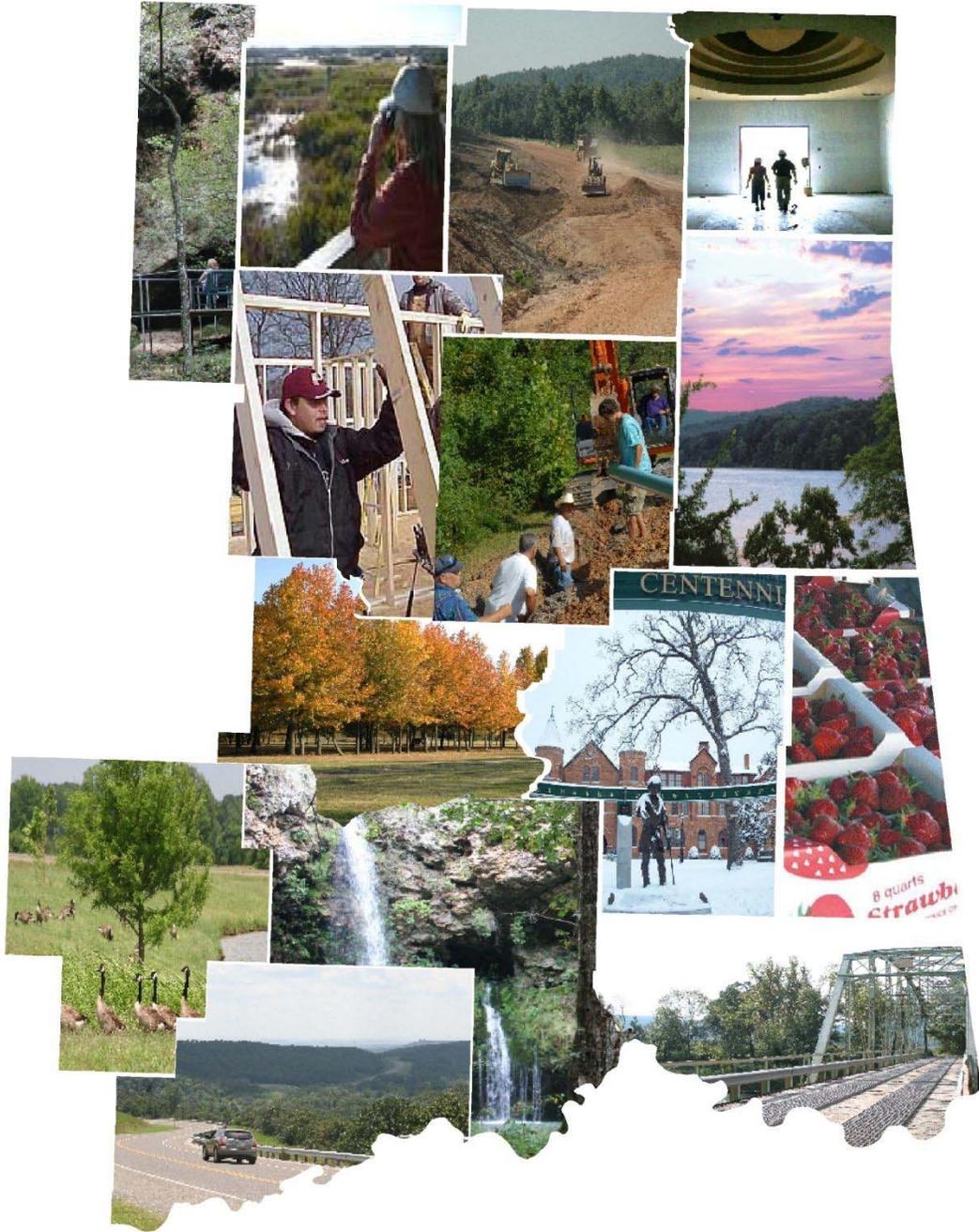


Table of Contents

COMMON LANGUAGE 3

INTRODUCTION 4

REGIONAL ACTION TEAMS..... 5

MISSION AND VISION 6

ENTREPRENEURSHIP..... 7

NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES 9

INFRASTRUCTURE..... 11

HIGHER EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION 13

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT 15

SKILLED, READY WORKFORCE 17

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES 19

COMMON VISION, COMMON VOICE 21

Northeast Oklahoma Regional Planning Partners

Cherokee Nation	Tahlequah Area Chamber of Commerce	Eastern Oklahoma Development District
Northeastern State University	Muskogee Area Chamber of Commerce	USDA Rural Development
Northeast Oklahoma Rural Alliance	Miami Chamber of Commerce	Grand River Dam Authority
Rogers State University	Jay Chamber of Commerce	Northeast Oklahoma Public Facilities Authority
Northeastern A&M University	Pryor Area Chamber of Commerce	Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology
Oklahoma Department of Commerce	Sallisaw Chamber of Commerce	Arvest Bank
State Senator Jim Wilson	Green Country Marketing Association	PSO/AEP
Congressman Dan Boren	Muskogee Development	AT&T
State Representative Mike Brown	Port of Muskogee	Wal-Mart
Town of Vian	OSU Extension Service, Wagoner	Sodexo
Town of Oaks	Lake Area United Way	Lake Region Electric Cooperative
Town of Kansas	Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City	Flint Ridge Home Owners Association
Town of Westville	Indian Capital Technology Center	Flint Ridge Water District
Town of West Siloam Springs	Northeast Technology Center	Muskogee Daily Phoenix
Town of Gore	Connors State College	Tahlequah Daily Press
City of Jay	Smart Start	Stilwell Democratic Journal
City of Stilwell	Eastern Workforce Investment Board	Oaks Mission School
City of Muskogee	Northeast Workforce Investment Board	Green Country Behavioral Health
City of Tahlequah	Grand Gateway Economic Development Association	McDonalds
City of Miami		
Watts School		
City of Sallisaw		
City of Nowata		

Common Language

Northeast Oklahoma Region – includes rural counties in northeast Oklahoma – Adair, Cherokee, Craig, Delaware, Mayes, McIntosh, Muskogee, Nowata, Okmulgee, Ottawa, Rogers, Sequoyah, Wagoner, and Washington counties.

Finding – identified at the 2009 Regional Summit as an area of critical importance in order for this Region to grow. Eight findings were identified: Entrepreneurship; Natural and Cultural Resources; Infrastructure; Higher and Vocational Education; Leadership Development; Skilled, Ready Workforce; and Socio Economic Issues.

Result – a condition of well-being we want for our communities and Region; the well-being of people in our Region; conditions that voters and tax payers can understand.

Indicator – how we measure conditions; a measure that states achievement of a result.

Baseline – tells us where we are right now and where we have been in the past; a trend line that illustrates where we are headed if we do not do something differently.

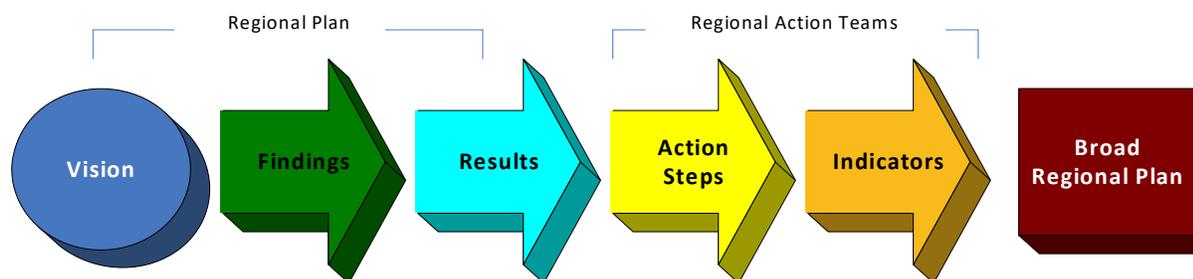
Action Steps – what must happen in order to achieve results.

Collaboration – a group of people and/or organizations with common interests, working toward common goals. Collaboration goes beyond coordinating, cooperating, and partnering to include group decision making and increasing the capacity of others involved.

INTRODUCTION

The Region is comprised of fourteen counties in Northeastern Oklahoma with a total estimated 2009 population of 584,513 individuals; the Region has expanded from the seven county area initially identified. In a collaborative effort, Northeast Oklahoma Rural Alliance, formerly SACC-EZ, a regional economic development cooperative; Cherokee Nation; and Northeastern State University envisioned a regional gathering to tell our story. These three founding partners, along with the Northeast Oklahoma Planning Partners noted on the first page, conducted a regional summit aimed to develop a regional plan and a regional collaborative in order to strengthen the long-term economic well-being of the Region and improve the quality of life for all citizens.

At the 2009 Summit, leaders from across the Region discussed assets on which to build our Region and issues which must be addressed to achieve optimal growth. Northeast Oklahoma is an area rich in cultural and natural beauty, with abundant recreational opportunities, and a strong, proud citizenry; however, the partners also acknowledged the Region is home to some of the poorest in the country with approximately twenty-one percent (21%) of the population living below the poverty threshold. The solution determined at the 2009 Summit was to build a strong regional collaboration and encourage leaders from chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, business owners, non-profit groups, educators, workforce development, and government, including tribal, local, state, and federal, to join together and develop a broad regional plan. The planning process would bond our communities together through common interests and provide a common voice to communicate regional needs to tribal, local, state, and federal officials. At this point many regions or communities might engage a consultant to develop a regional plan, nevertheless, this group of community leaders agreed to take this task on themselves and conducted the 2009 inaugural summit as a means to increase regional understanding and begin the planning process by identifying assets and issues. Regional growth hinges on our ability as a Region to share a common voice, a common agenda, a common plan, and a common commitment. In 2010, the draft regional plan was reviewed, modified, and adopted by over 300 community leaders representing the 14 counties targeted by the regional plan and collaboration.



The regional plan includes a regional vision, findings, results, action steps and indicators of success necessary to achieve the shared agenda through commitment and leadership. The plan is intended to enable a future for the Region whereby the people of northeast Oklahoma have opportunities for meaningful, productive work and effective community involvement amidst a high quality natural and culturally rich environment.

REGIONAL ACTION TEAMS

Regional Action Teams are critical to plan implementation. These teams will be formed at the community level, with leaders from across the Region collaborating with one another to address specific results and action steps identified in the regional plan. Regional Action Teams will be “on the ground” support for the plan, identifying and engaging other community stakeholders, recommending plan revisions based on experiences and best practices, and monitoring, as well as celebrating our successes. It is important to note the regional plan is a fluid document; as our Region grows and changes through our actions so will the regional plan.

Regional Action Teams must be comprised of leaders who are passionate about achieving results and who understand that without action we are doomed to remain stagnate. Team members accept personal responsibility for their communities. Initial orientation meetings for Regional Action Teams will be held following the 2010 Summit where our regional team leaders will be identified.

REGIONAL ACTION TEAM RESPONSIBILITIES	
Disseminate the plan in their communities	Prioritize action steps based on various criteria, including cost
Identify and engage stakeholders throughout the Region	Develop budgets or resource listings for action plans (this will be used to create a regional financing strategy)
Finalize regional indicators to measure success	Identify staffing needs and identify regional partners to assist with staffing needs
Obtain benchmark data (this activity can be supported by regional partners such as ODOC, NSU, RSU, NEO, and Cherokee Nation)	Manage documentation processes and measuring success semi-annually
Research best practices (this activity can be supported by regional partners such as NSU, RSU, NEO, and Cherokee Nation)	Revise and update results and action steps, as needed

Regional Action Teams will democratically determine how the team is organized, its implementation methods, and its meeting frequency. Ideally at least one Regional Action Team will take responsibility for each Action Step and it is anticipated that Regional Action Teams will address more than one action step.

The regional plan is an important first step in growing our Region; however, an essential next step is community planning. Regional Action Team members will be encouraged to lead their community in a localized planning effort that will identify community specific issues and support the regional plan.

Each and every one of us has it within ourselves to be a leader for our community and our Region; leaders are the catalyst for change. It will be critical for Regional Action Teams to identify both formal and informal leaders in their communities and engage them in the growth process. Regional Action Teams must think “out of the box” to identify individuals or organizations that could influence the desired results. A partial listing of stakeholders for consideration includes:

Churches	Economic Development Boards	Federal Agencies
Families	Civic Organizations	Counties
Social Services	Non-Profit Organizations	Cities / Towns
School Systems (PK-16)	Libraries	Support Entities –
Youth Organizations	Police / Emergency Responders	Accountants
Learn & Serve Programs	Municipalities	Technical / Innovation
Student Organizations	Workforce Investment Boards	Businesses
State Youth Councils	Workforce	Government Agencies
Chambers of Commerce	State Agencies	Tribal Entities

REGIONAL VISION AND MISSION

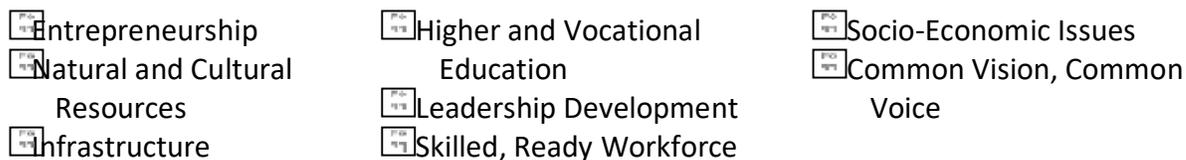
“Northeast Oklahoma is a unified Region of unique, vibrant, and sustainable communities with abundant natural beauty and rich cultural heritage; where our diverse population takes great pride and accepts responsibility for our future; where innovative leadership is cultivated, children are treasured, meaningful high paying jobs are plentiful, and recreational opportunities abound; the Region of choice to live, work, and play.”

In order to realize our Vision, citizens of northeast Oklahoma must accept responsibility for our future and work together to fulfill our Mission:

“The Northeast Oklahoma Regional Collaborative is dedicated to the growth, prosperity, and vitality of northeast Oklahoma, and its communities, by promoting regionalism throughout the area; leveraging regional resources; recognizing common issues and identifying collaborative solutions; expanding regional networks; and communicating our regional story.”

FINDINGS: CRITICAL FACTORS FOR REGIONAL GROWTH

At the 2009 Summit, attendees participated in Phase I of the regional plan; leaders met in groups to discuss common regional assets and common regional growth issues. A number of assets and growth issues were shared by many if not all communities. Eight topics rose from these discussions as dominant factors that shape regional growth:



The 2009 Summit discussions targeted factors critical for regional growth; post summit work groups were held throughout the Region to identify broad results and the action steps necessary to achieve the desired results. The results and action steps were designed to be accomplished in two to three years. Regional Action Teams will develop longer term steps as the plan evolves. Reading through each finding note many discussions overlap into more than one finding; where these overlaps occur, the information gleaned from the deliberations were placed with the finding most closely aligned. At the 2010 Summit the draft plan was reviewed, modified, and adopted by approximately 300 community leaders.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

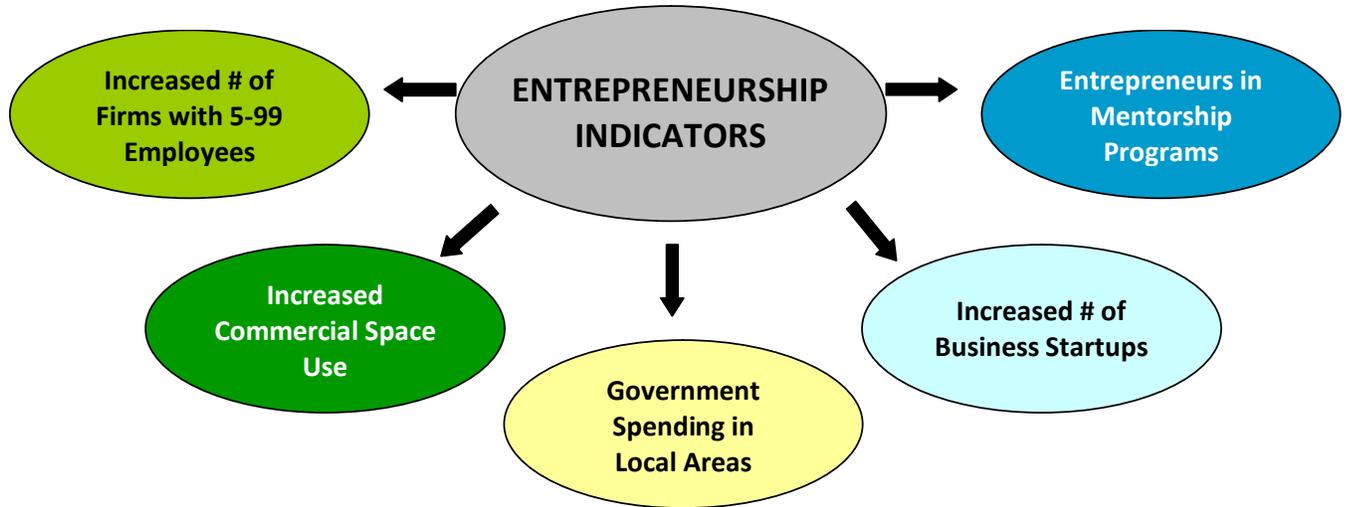
“Entrepreneurship in northeast Oklahoma is the foundation of our communities; it connects our communities; it is engrained in community culture; and it is the key to job growth. Northeast Oklahoma appreciates and supports our visionary, risk-taking entrepreneurs.”

Entrepreneurship and business expansion/retention are keys to growing our local economies and creating local jobs. Northeast Oklahoma’s top net occupations are expected to shrink by 2015, with the exception of agriculture managers, agriculture workers, and drivers. As global competition persists, supporting current businesses and new business startups is essential, as are educational institutions that create entrepreneurs instead of employees. A Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation study shows companies less than five years old created nearly two-thirds of net new jobs in 2007.

Entrepreneurship discussions typically revolved around three central themes: 1) embracing local entrepreneurs, 2) improving communication channels, and 3) providing a skilled workforce. The deliberations regarding these themes brought forth two results:

1. **A Culture of Support for Entrepreneurship** – communities should encourage and support entrepreneurs through their spending habits, with funding/investments, and through education.
2. **Engaged Entrepreneurs** – entrepreneurs are the backbone of local economies and their deep involvement in their communities is critical through mentoring youth and start-up entrepreneurs, providing community leadership and supporting community organizations.

HOW WILL WE KNOW IT IS WORKING?

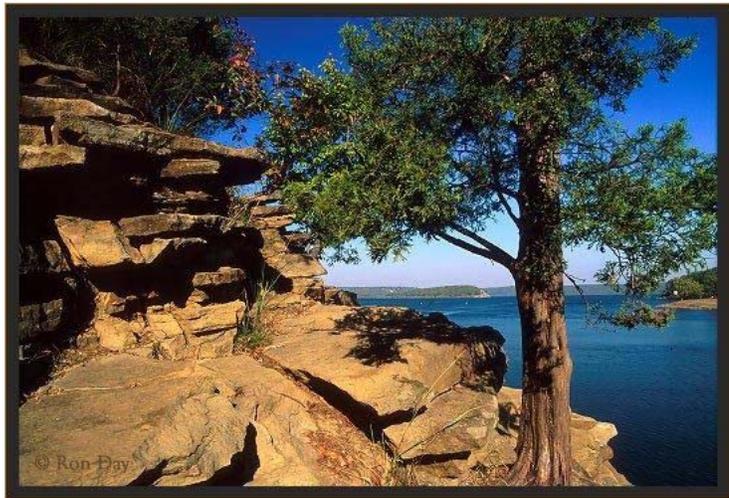


Action Steps	
Research youth entrepreneurship programs, engage schools and engage the business community; develop a regional plan for implementation; include youth/business mentorship program	Implement business training in regard to employment, management, and marketing skills on both community and regional levels; include start-up/experienced business mentorship program
Create a Regional One Stop Business Resource Center (virtual and/or physical) to identify regional resources and provide easy access for entrepreneurs; include identification of regional business opportunities - investment opportunities, transitioning businesses, and identification of regional industry clusters	Analyze entrepreneurial environment in various communities and aid community plans to enhance entrepreneurial culture; Economic Gardening – grow local businesses through community support/culture; create regional product branding and “Buy Regional” campaigns, including local foods
Research legality of local governments providing preferential purchasing treatment to local businesses (for both government generated revenue and state/federal revenue); if applicable engage local governments to buy local	Improve access to capital for start up, agricultural, and expanding businesses, including increasing Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI), educating businesses on existing resources, and developing a regional Angel Investors Network

NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

“Natural and Cultural Resources in northeast Oklahoma exemplify our strong diverse cultures and it is our responsibility to collaborate to protect and enhance our resources as a mechanism to attract visitors and maintain a high quality of life for residents.”

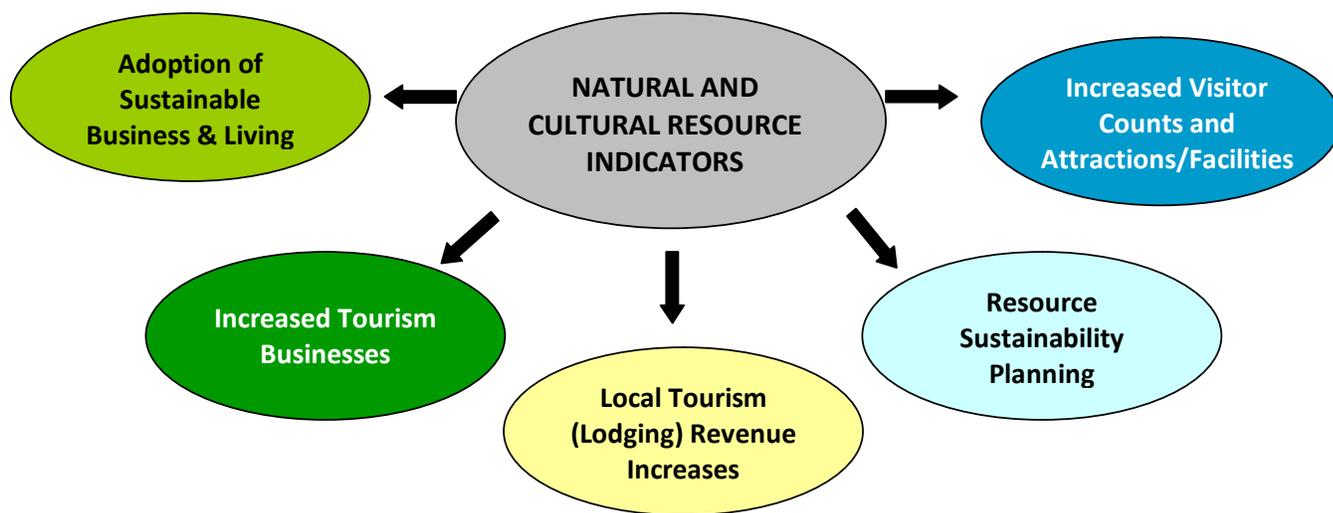
Our Region’s natural and cultural resources are beyond compare. Every area of our Region identifies numerous attractions and activities, which combined with our American Indian heritage, serve as a basis for a strong, niche tourism industry. The Region recognizes the important role the Arts play as an economic driver, attractor of talent, and important ingredient in “quality of life”. Our Region is also sandwiched between the Tulsa, Fayetteville-Rogers, and Fort Smith metro areas, providing not only local tourist bases but air transportation hubs and other amenities. The general small town atmosphere, regional outdoor activities, and higher education opportunities, blended with the fairly low cost of living and competitive real estate prices provide a workforce friendly environment.



Natural and cultural resources discussions focused on how to leverage, while protecting, our regional assets for regional growth. Three central themes emerged: 1) maximizing our strong tourism industry base and branding our Region for tourists, 2) promoting artists as a cultural resource, and 3) protecting our resources through comprehensive sustainability planning. Tourism, as an export industry, is a key component to growing our regional economy, particularly in our smaller communities. It is largely driven by our Region’s natural assets and strong livability. The Cherokee Hills Byway is a prime example of how a collaborative can engage regional stakeholders around a common interest; municipalities, tourist attractions, environmental groups, state agencies, tribal governments, and citizens are working together to create not only a memorable traveling experience but also a viable economic engine for the Region. Community deliberations regarding the aforementioned themes brought forth two results:

1. **A Healthy Diversified Tourism Base** – collaborative planning and promotion, highlighting all tourism opportunities our Region has to offer.
2. **Sustainable, Protected Natural Resources** – regional growth must consider conservation and smart use of resources for this and future generations.

HOW WILL WE KNOW IT IS WORKING?



Action Steps	
Identify all tourism organizations and form a collaborative Regional Tourism Advisory Council	Identify stakeholders in tourism and resource conservation and provide networking opportunities
Inventory cultural and artistic resources	Develop and document model regional initiatives such as the Byway and Greenway projects
Develop a resource guide to demonstrate the economic benefit of tourism in communities; develop/implement an education campaign on community impact of increased tourism/lodging taxes	Engage all areas in regional “Story Telling” and branding campaign highlighting our assets to both tourists and residents; develop a PowerPoint presentation to share with all communities
Develop “Green Standards” , particularly in areas with economic value	Identify/develop/protect regional natural resources and determine economic value for each resource, i.e. water resources, undeveloped land, local food production
Develop “Smart Growth” planning assistance for communities during planning processes	Expand regional marketing , including participating and enhancing current regional marketing activities
Regional participation in Oklahoma’s certification for sustainable travel – Encouraging Conservation in Oklahoma	Develop/implement a regional recycling plan to reduce waste flow to landfills and improve aesthetics of our Region through regional/community pride

INFRASTRUCTURE

“Infrastructure in Northeast Oklahoma provides opportunity for investment and job creation through resources and innovative technologies; readily available utilities with an emphasis on renewable energy; accessible transportation venues for business/industry; citizens and travelers; extensive emergency services; and green standards for infrastructure development.”

Infrastructure expansion in our Region will allow us to fully support current systems and future growth. The southern part of the Region has significant transportation infrastructure,



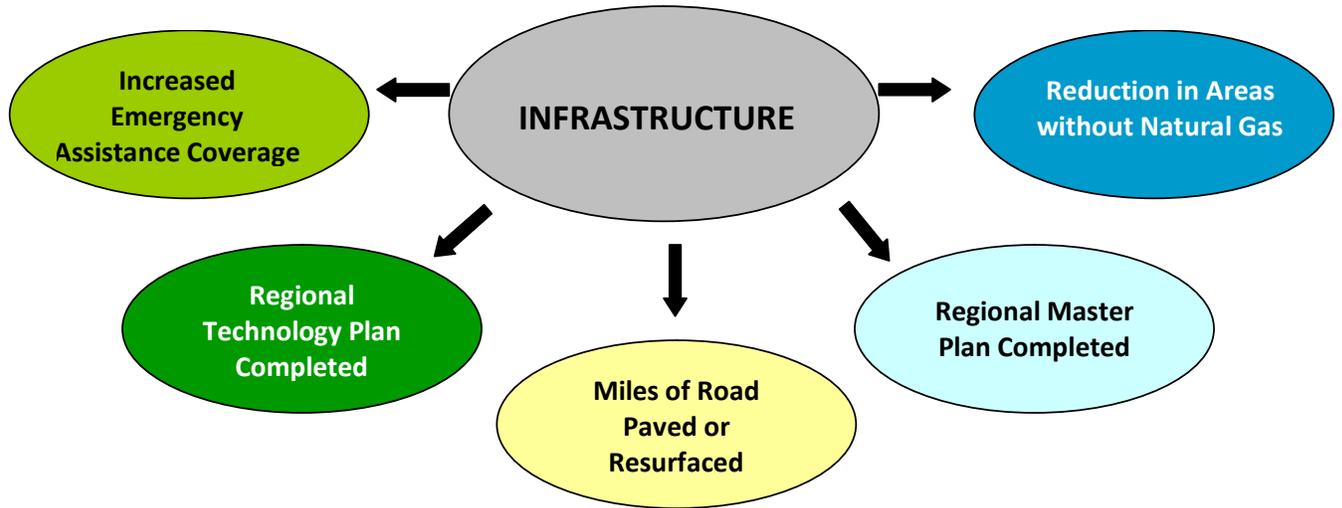
including highway, rail, water, and quick access to air. An expanded regional viewpoint should result in transportation collaborations and increased utilization of existing resources. As the internet and modern transportation has shifted state and national economies to more global economies, a digital divide continues to exist in many of the Region’s more rural areas and alternative access is cost prohibitive. The Region has valuable natural resources that must be balanced with the needs of the

infrastructure; as we enter into growth mode, we must remain conscientious about balancing our ecosystem with growth.

Infrastructure discussions focused on a wide range of topics based on current needs and future growth. The infrastructure discussions included transportation, technology, and utilities, as well as parks and recreation, financial services, community services, and economic development. Five central themes emerged: 1) master planning for the Region, 2) developing parks and recreational areas, 3) improving transportation venues, access to utilities, and upgrading technology, 4) increasing access for citizens to financial services and community services, and 5) supporting economic development. Community deliberations regarding the themes brought forth four results:

1. **Affordable Broadband Communications in all Communities** – both a development plan and financing plan to make this a reality.
2. **Established Emergency Services to all Communities** – many of the smaller communities and towns do not have the tax base or facilities to operate emergency services, particularly medical emergency services.
3. **Affordable Utilities in all Rural Areas** – certain areas in the Region do not have access to natural gas and water. Affordable utilities are critical to housing and economic development.
4. **Adequate, Safe, and Travelable Roads** – outside of towns and organized communities, safe roadways continue to be an issue, which hampers citizen travel for services and jobs.

HOW WILL WE KNOW IT IS WORKING?



Action Steps	
Develop a resource base to provide planning assistance to communities, including tribes and Councils of Government	Develop and leverage resource base to assist communities with efforts to increase accessibility and integration of trans-modal transportation – roadways, rail, air, freight, and public transportation
Create a Master Plan , including green standards for development and renewable energy sources; community composting; and other critical elements determined by the Regional Action Team	Develop plans to expand broadband access , including internet and emergency communications, identify funding sources, and utilize the Red Dirt Ready Program
Support legislation allowing municipalities and local entities to diversify their revenue to fund essential local government functions	Provide a website with necessary regional information for community use in competing for economic development opportunities
Work with federal and state legislators to ensure regional needs are included in state and federal plans, including maximizing the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System and waterway transportation	Develop community resources providing assistance with industrial park certification ; categorize industrial parks and demonstrate “site ready” status
Establish a plan to collaboratively address how adequate water and waste water alternatives will be made available to residential, commercial and industrial customers in the Region	

HIGHER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

“Higher and vocational education institutions in northeast Oklahoma are collaborative groups that empower families to become self-sufficient; produce highly-educated individuals; provide comprehensive career counseling; achieve higher than state average in job placements; experience well below average dropout rates; and provide cost-effective educational opportunities.”

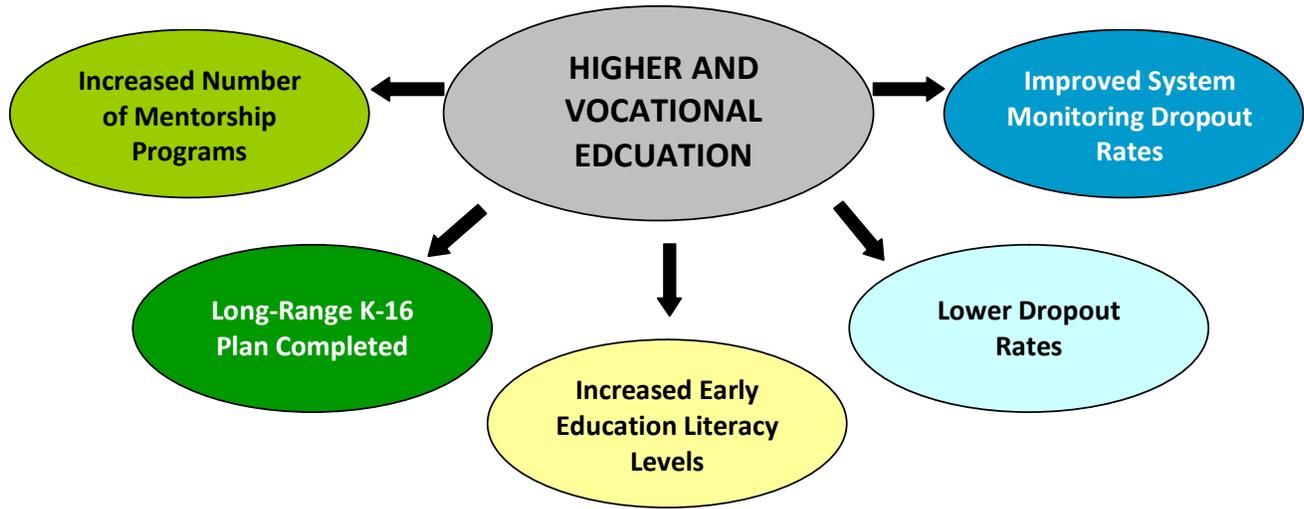
Higher education opportunities are plentiful and accessible in our Region. Oklahoma also boasts a top ranked vocational education system. Moreover, our regional universities are chartering roles as community partners, focusing efforts on building capacity and supporting community development. Conversely, educational attainment of our population is abysmal. Our regional population is far less likely than other areas of the state and the nation to go to college, much less obtain a bachelor or graduate degree. Our Region exceeds the state and the nation in obtaining high school diplomas, although areas of our Region experience some of the highest dropout rates in the state. The Educational Needs Index lists four counties within our Region as “most critical” and two counties as “critical”.

In addition to general education gaps, our workforce would benefit from improved managerial skills and leadership training. The reality is that a lack of the basic skills required in the workplace keeps far too many of our Region’s citizens unemployed and underemployed. These leadership and managerial skill sets and skill levels are currently not part of the average high school, college, or vocational experience. Many high school students see their high school experience as practically irrelevant to their future – education is oftentimes provided without sufficient connection to the realities of the economy. We must make high school a place where applied learning is part of a continuum on the way to workforce and lifelong learning.

Higher and vocational education discussions focused on three central themes: 1) increased post-secondary education access and attainment, 2) decreased dropout rate in pre-kindergarten through high school, and 3) improved leadership and managerial skills in the workforce. Community deliberations regarding the themes brought forth three results:

1. **Post-secondary Education is Available, Attainable, and Realistic for all Communities** – in order to be truly successful, we cannot simply have the most skilled labor force; we must be a Region that produces the newest and best ideas, innovations, products, and businesses. Our education delivery can and must be more relevant, better connected to the economy, include improved student options, be increasingly seamless, and be aligned toward high standards.
2. **The Dropout Rate in all Levels of Education must Improve Throughout the Region** – areas of our Region experience some of the highest dropout rates in the state, particularly between eighth and ninth grade, and our system of monitoring dropout rates leaves much to be desired.
3. **Our Population Views Education as a Lifelong Process** – we must accept that continued learning is critical to managing personal career paths and maintaining a high quality workforce.

HOW WILL WE KNOW IT IS WORKING?



Action Steps	
<p>Identify laws and policies (both federal and state) that inhibit change/engagement in assessment and testing practices, funding opportunities, special education guidelines, relevance of curriculum, homeschooling guidelines, etc. and include recommendations in long-range education plan</p>	<p>Leverage technology in education systems to increase exposure and better engage future digital generations while balancing personal interaction with electronic communication to better prepare students for careers and allow educators to share ideas through collaborative learning</p>
<p>Develop our own long-range regional education plan that addresses rural challenges i.e. appropriate assessment techniques, socio-economic challenges, and scaling regional best practices; use creative problem-solving to become a change leader</p>	<p>Create and implement community based Mentorship Programs engaging businesses, communities, elders, and college students</p>
<p>Engage children at an early age in educational goals and re-energize teachers to help themselves, children and their families stay motivated and focused on those goals throughout their education</p>	<p>Conduct educational forums and cooperatives for regional educators and parents/guardians, including engaging parents in the educational process and in Parent Teacher Organizations</p>



LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

“Northeast Oklahoma is full of leaders that are experienced, highly-educated, and inspiring; they are mentors for youth, proactive, collaborative, and servants to their communities.”



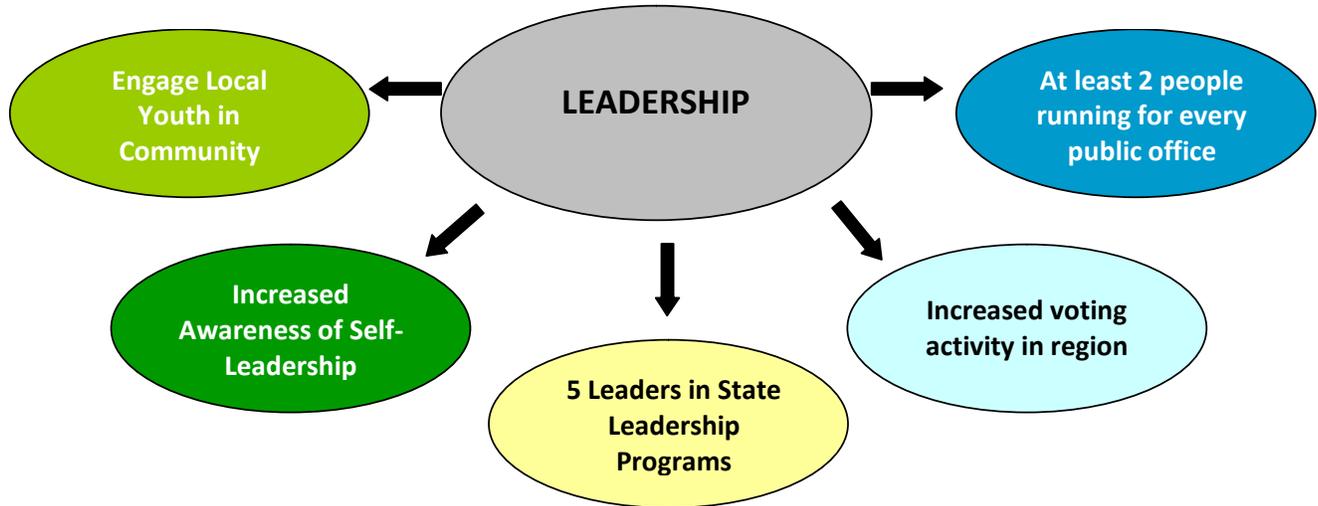
Leadership abounds in our communities through our citizens, our civic organizations, and our local and tribal governments. Regional leadership is essential to regional development and the success of the regional summit is indicative that our local governments are cooperative and willing to work with one another to address growth issues and encourage collaboration. Our people and civic organizations are the backbones of our communities; however, our aging population and lower levels of work

aged adults necessitate youth leadership development to maintain and grow our leadership base. We must keep our youth at home and civically engaged in order for them to become progressive regional leaders of tomorrow.

Leadership discussions focused on three central themes: 1) creating a regional leadership network, 2) building leadership in youth while encouraging leadership in adults, and 3) building a regional leadership plan. Community deliberations regarding the themes brought forth two results:

- 1. All Regional Leaders Embrace a Culture of Collaboration** – we must create a culture of collaboration in our Region; a culture that goes far beyond partnering and coordinating to group decision making and increasing the capacity of others.
- 2. Regional Leadership is Engaged at all Levels** – our leaders should be completely engaged, not only in their own community but in the Region; leadership must take on the challenge of engaging and promoting new leadership.

HOW WILL WE KNOW IT IS WORKING?

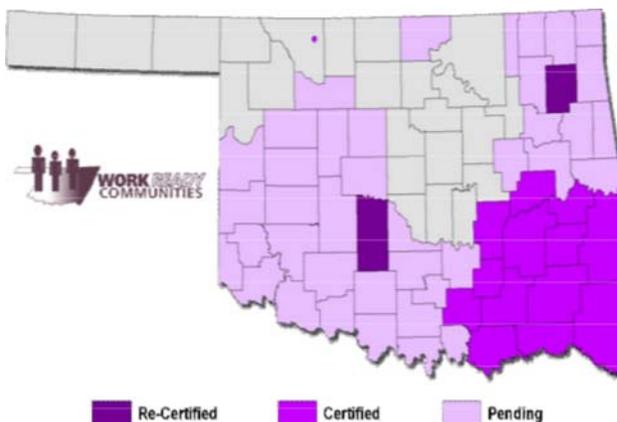


Action Steps	
Develop “self-leadership” education campaign and self awareness survey measuring public awareness of self-leadership (what I think, do, and say affects others and my community)	Build a Regional Leadership Plan to engage leaders in regionalism (beyond their immediate communities), learn the art of collaboration, and cultivate new leaders
Identify unmet leadership needs in communities and work with communities to cultivate leaders with specific skills	Identify existing leadership programs for community referrals and best practice models for replication
Create database of regional leaders , including informal leaders, noting the expertise of each so it can be used as a resource base	Engage communities to explore “leadership scholarships” for community youth with the caveat they return to their community to work
Define leadership and roles of leaders in communities	Create a Regional Leadership Academy to cultivate and network regional leaders
Identify leadership opportunities and models for young people	Create Semi-Annual Regional Leadership Networking opportunities

SKILLED, READY WORKFORCE

“Northeast Oklahoma has a workforce comprised of highly-skilled and educated workers who earn above a living wage by following career paths; a workforce that has easily accessible jobs and is motivated by businesses that hire within the community; a workforce with competitive opportunities to live, work, and play in northeast Oklahoma.”

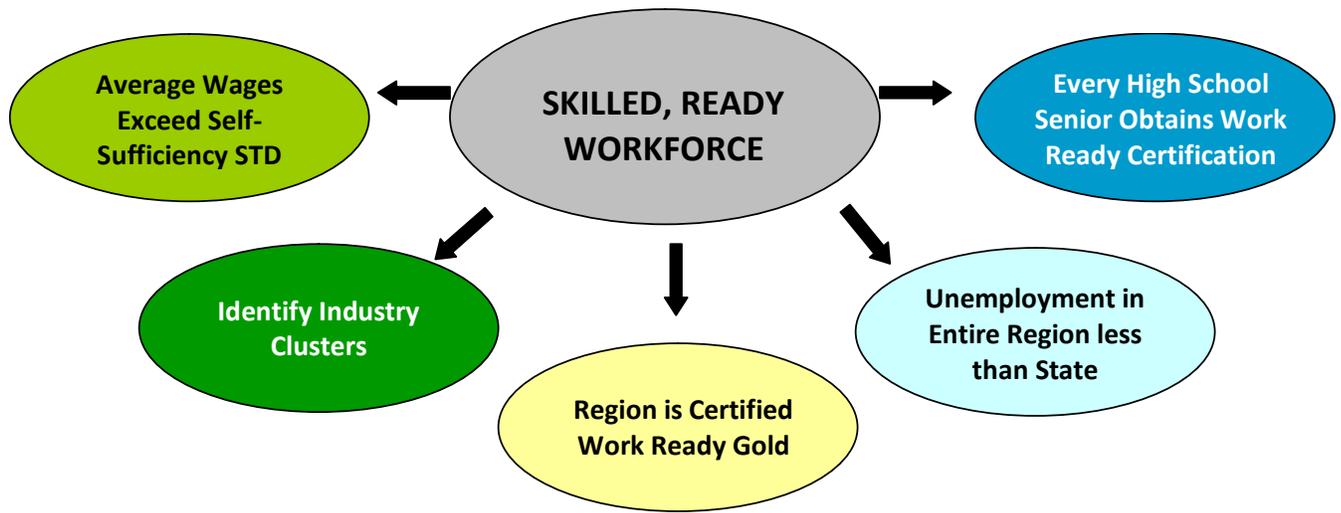
Our Region should focus on retaining a skilled, ready workforce. We have a population that is growing in comparison to the rest of the state. Our youth and elderly populations exceed that of the rest of the state and the nation; however, our workforce population, aged 30 to 59, is less than that of the state and the nation. Regional wages are at the lower end of the spectrum in comparison with the state and two of our counties, Cherokee and Adair, are considered consistent poverty counties. As a Region, our unemployment rates are typically comparable with the state rates and lower than the national average, although it varies greatly by county. As a rural Region much of our workforce commutes to metro areas and as the rural business economy expands through planned growth we must find ways to retain our ‘best and brightest’ by focusing on career path jobs.



Workforce discussions drew many community participants, second only to the Infrastructure discussions, and focused on two central themes: 1) effectively engage skilled workers and reduce the underutilized workforce and 2) train unskilled workers or workers with non-transferrable skills. Community deliberations regarding the themes brought forth three results:

1. **Northeast Oklahoma will be a Certified Work Ready Community** – this will not only help new businesses decide to locate in northeast Oklahoma, but it will provide a comfort level for existing employers regarding their workforce and expansion possibilities; currently thirty states participate in the Work Ready Community Certification program and Oklahoma is considered a Silver State with levels of Bronze, Silver, Gold, and most recently Platinum.
2. **The Region has In-depth Knowledge of Existing and/or Expanding Industry Clusters** – workforce, economic developers, communities, and educators all understand the regional industry clusters and prepare entrepreneurs and workforce to meet industry needs.
3. **All Regional Workforce Programs are Collaborative and Share Resources** – workforce and career training programs eliminate all boundaries to provide seamless transitions in training our workforce.

HOW WILL WE KNOW IT IS WORKING?



Action Steps	
Forecast industry trends and inventory growth in job and career opportunities, including industry clusters and peripheral jobs to support primary industries	Identify barriers to employment and identify plans to address those barriers through regional stakeholders, including workforce health, both physical and behavioral; transportation; quality, affordable daycare that focuses on child development versus babysitting
Enhance “Life-long Learning” concept with skill-building programs that retool and advance workers on career path jobs that earn self-sufficient wages	Develop school based curriculum that engages regional businesses in order for students to understand how education translates into job skills
Inventory funding resources for career counseling and job training	Incorporate life skills, employability skills, and work ethics into all career training
Inventory workforce training resources and develop collaborative model so services are coordinated, unique, and seamless	Research best practices regarding community based programs that engage school aged children into the evening and throughout the summer months
	Develop regional and community business teams that focus on retention and expansion efforts

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES

“Northeast Oklahoma has a societal foundation that expects the best for our citizens and is built on a school system that produces healthy, educated, and drug free children who make smart choices; families that have strong values and employ healthy parenting skills, which produces school ready children; housing that is adequate and affordable; and a holistic health system that is evidence based, accessible, and cost effective.”

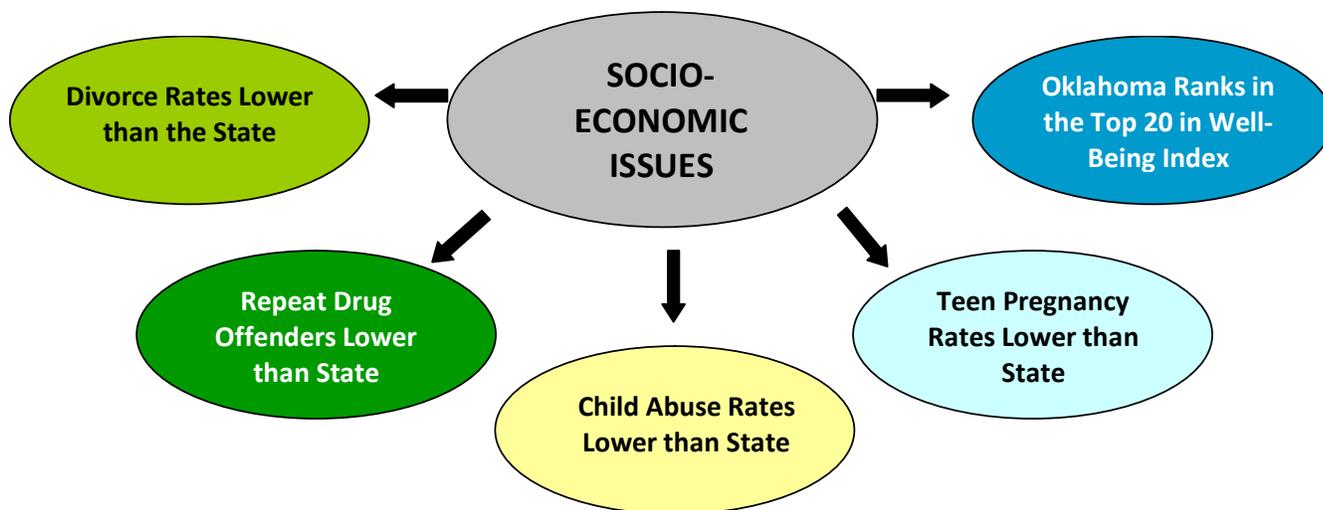
Socio-economic issues may hinder our regional growth potential. To remedy these issues at their roots, additional resources, including parenting skills training, must be directed toward family services targeting children ages zero to three. This is a critical age for child development to provide a solid foundation in order for children to learn and avoid behavioral issues occurring in our rural areas such as drugs, violence, and domestic abuse that result in unengaged citizens. Educational services must focus on the “whole child” versus small skill sets. Northeast Oklahoma continues to struggle with cycles of poverty among families which perpetuate stymied growth. Oklahoma is at the lowest end of Gallup’s Well-Being Index with a ranking of 43 out of 50, which is primarily due to the very low ranking of eastern Oklahoma (422nd out of 435). Considerable resources will be required for preventative services, which produce only long term results; however, without such change we will never have enough resources to address the results.



Socio-economic discussions were wide reaching and focused on four central themes: 1) improving coordination, communication, and collaboration of social service agencies and education, 2) addressing holistic family needs, 3) developing business and community partnerships to build and support schools, and 4) increasing awareness and access to services focusing on teen pregnancy. Community deliberations regarding the themes brought four results:

1. **General Well-Being of Northeast Oklahoma Exceeds the Nation’s Average** – we must take responsibility for our future and this empowerment will increase expectations and well-being.
2. **Teen Pregnancy Rates in the Region are Far Below State Average** – teen pregnancies have a great impact on workforce skills, school ready children, and a host of other socio-economic issues.
3. **Child Abuse and Divorce Rates in Northeast Oklahoma are Far Below State Average** – family stress is caused by a myriad of socio-economic issues and child abuse/divorce rates are indications of such stress.
4. **Businesses and Communities have Rallied in Support of Schools** – schools have become responsible for teaching children life skills, coping skills, and education; they cannot do this alone it requires strong community support.

HOW WILL WE KNOW IT IS WORKING?



Action Steps	
<p>Each County will create a social/health service directory for their County that will be completed by 2010/2011 and will be updated quarterly</p>	<p>Institute “Bridges out of Poverty” in leadership training programs and community based organizations such as, community action groups, Regional Action Teams, community stakeholders, ministry alliance, etc.</p>

Action Steps	
Research best practices for a community driven regional structure and determine a best fit for our Region	Survey stakeholders to define our regional brand or identity
Institute a Northeast Oklahoma Day at the state capital	Educate communities on our regional brand and how to use it
Develop network with other rural regional collaborations throughout the United States	Identify our stakeholders and audience; gain local buy-in

Northeast Oklahoma’s growth begins with individual commitment; it starts with one action and grows to a collaborative effort. We must change our mindset and improve the quality of life for ourselves and our children. Our Region is ever evolving, ever changing, and requires direction to achieve the results we desire. And so the journey continues...