

Starting Early Discussion Guide

Recommendations for Taking Action

Create a sense of urgency

Voters are currently largely ignorant of the cost of *not* increasing the quality and availability of early education programs. While recognized as a benefit for children, these programs are not acknowledged as a necessity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) What stories can you tell about a family's struggle with finding high quality early learning opportunities?
- 2) Who in your community needs to know about these stories and data?
- 3) Is this part of your Discovery communications plan?

IDEAS:

- Work with other statewide efforts like Connecticut Parent Power and the Early Childhood Alliance to keep informed and get involved. There is power in collaboration
- When superintendents or kindergarten teachers talk about children who enter school unprepared, and the consequences for the entire classroom, people listen. Enlist local educators to speak out on the need for early childhood education.
- Employers also understand that a lack of child care or worries about quality early education can be barriers to their workers' productivity. Survey local employers and find out more about why they feel it is urgent to solve these issues.

Get parents of young children politically involved in this issue

Policy makers continually reported that they never hear from voters/parents about early education issues especially issues of access and quality. That's one of the reasons they have no sense of urgency about these issues.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) Do parents know how local and state policy decisions are made and implemented?
- 2) Are there ways you can keep parents informed and get them involved in advocating for accessible, affordable and quality early childhood education?
- 3) Are there forums you can sponsor or take part in where you can appropriately share information about the benefits of early education and care?
- 4) Are there easy ways parents can participate that don't take a lot of time or energy but speak loudly in support of quality early education?

IDEAS:

- Set up a postcard drive at events for young children around the state where parents fill out a postcard with their name, address and a short message or story. Share these stories with policymakers, or, the local media. Consider building on the stories with a letter-to-the editor campaign.
- Work with other statewide efforts like Connecticut Parent Power and the Early Childhood Alliance to keep informed and get involved.
- Survey parents and providers of early childhood education about waiting lists, and capture their stories on story cards, ready to use to help reporters, policymakers or others understand the urgency of finding quality care for young children. In other states, communities have staged a "non-strike" for a day by asking parents to wear buttons that read, "If I did not have child care today I could not be here at work."
- Support voter registration drives. Help is available from DemocracyWorks (www.democracyworksct.org).

Actively engage fathers of young children and women over the age of 50.

Fathers are a natural constituency for this issue, as there is obviously a lot at stake for them. A campaign based largely on the support of mothers would not be impossible, but it would be much more powerful if it included a united front by both parents. Women over age 50 are less natural allies—as they said in the focus group, most have little to gain personally from the state spending more money on young children. Yet they show signs of being “reachable.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) How are fathers currently involved in the Discovery work?
- 2) Do you keep track of how many fathers attend events or participate in programs?
- 3) How do you support fathers' involvement in the lives of their young children?
- 4) Is there a grandparent or senior mentoring program in your community? Are there other ways for older adults to get involved in the lives of young children?

IDEAS:

- Research where fathers congregate and then go to their workplaces or meeting places. Tap into sporting events and get coaches involved. Hold events just for fathers and ask them about how they would like to get information and what support they may need.
- Consider developing messages for mothers about helping fathers to feel more involved in young children's lives and to participate in making decisions.

- Include local men's groups in your communications plan.
- Enlist the help of a local women's group on a project that benefits young children, like a playground or scholarship fund for young children. Use this opportunity to share information about the importance of early childhood education.
- Ask preschools to reach out to fathers and grandparents to get them involved in early childhood education. For example, invite Dads to help fix up a center or help in other ways that demonstrate their unique contribution. While fathers are there, talk about how the work they are doing contributes to the early learning of their children. Hold multi-generational family picnics and encourage dads to participate in parent conferences.
- Piggyback on local education efforts or other programs that target fathers, for example, United Way's *Success by Six* campaign elements that focus on fathers.

Additional Recommendations for Advocates for Young Children

Acknowledge—and promote—parental responsibility.

Many of the hardest to reach audiences, such as women over 50, felt strongly that placing children in the care of someone else was a choice, not a necessity. By making that choice some people felt parents were abdicating their responsibilities as parents.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) This is a hot-button issue because it can make people feel uncomfortable – parents can feel guilty about balancing home and work, and the public can feel angry about how much life has appeared to change for families since earlier generations.
- 2) How are you demonstrating that parental responsibility and early learning opportunities go hand-in-hand?
- 3) How do parent leaders demonstrate the balancing of home and work?
How do you share their stories?
- 4) Is parent leadership recognized publicly and celebrated?

Because this is such a hot-button issue, with whatever strategies you decide to implement, as always, be conscious of cultural differences and issues.

IDEAS:

- It may work to focus on parents as leaders – both within their families and their communities – and to share stories that demonstrate leadership at all levels and the importance of being connected to the community.
- When parents access information or develop new skills, using resources in your community, ask the parents to share a story about how the skills are used to support their children's learning and up-bringing and document those stories.

Begin with growing programs targeted to at-risk populations with an eye toward expanding to universal access later.

Voters, parents, and policymakers are much more inclined to support increased funding for early education programs targeted at low-income and at-risk children. This message does not mean that programs need to be restricted to at-risk children alone. As experts know, research shows that all children benefit from early learning opportunities and that all children in a classroom of mixed abilities and backgrounds benefit from being together.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) How do you help the public to understand the range of needs of young children and their families?
- 2) How do you communicate to the public that children who need programs the most are on waiting lists or still in need?
- 3) Do you need more data about the children most at-risk in your community?
- 4) How do you communicate the benefits of early childhood programs for those at-risk? What specific data and studies support your case?

IDEAS:

- Collect and analyze data about the children most at-risk in your community, and then develop a message that sets a community goal of reaching those children within a specific time.
- Collect information about the needs of other families and develop stories and messages about the urgency of helping all children to succeed.
- Reach out to home-based providers to share their stories about how these providers work with and support families and help children to succeed in school.

Make accountability and quality measures centerpieces of any policy proposal.

Most legislators are only willing to commit additional funds to early education if they know that they will see results.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) What information is your community tracking to show the benefits of early learning programs? Is the data appropriate? Is it sufficient?
- 2) Do educators and parents agree on what data is important and how to use it?
- 3) Have community members had an opportunity to talk about what "quality" features of an early childhood program are most important for young children's success?
- 4) What information would be useful from the state? From others?
- 5) Are there models for how assessments can be used to support a child's development, or, the improvement of programs?

IDEAS:

- Distribute a one page bulleted list of kindergarten readiness measures to parents, policymakers and citizens, and use it to start a discussion about how early childhood programs promote readiness.
- Develop messages about what a quality program looks like, and how accreditation and raising education requirements for providers makes a difference for young children.
- Knowing legislators want to hear from people, send policymakers a letter, drawing, or craft project made by a three- or four-year-old, getting ready for kindergarten. Use the project to talk about how quality programs contribute to school readiness and school success.

Have hard data—with credible citations—to back up claims of the value and benefits of early childhood education.

In addition to having assurances that programs that receive state funds will be accountable for their work, policymakers want to know that there are going to be real benefits to a significant investment in early childhood programs over the long-term.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) What information about cost benefits does your community have to demonstrate the effectiveness of investing in early childhood programs?
- 2) What information from other communities can you use?
- 3) What national research can you use?

IDEAS:

- Use very simple facts. Stick to the data but make it simple, and give hard facts and support them.
- Check out fact sheets and other information available from Connecticut Voices for Children (www.ctkidslink.org), the Commission on Children (www.cga.ct.gov/COC) and other national researchers.