

Advocacy: From Awareness to Action

by Ana Page, Monica Brinkerhoff, Mary Beth Salomone Testa, and Samantha Marshall

Children need advocates. They need you. Early childhood professionals are engaged with our children's needs, day in and day out. As early childhood professionals, advocacy is as crucial as our passion for our work. We are experts in early development and learning. Who else is better equipped to advocate for policies that support young children and their families and to promote excellence in our field? According to Dictionary.com, an advocate is: "A person who speaks or writes in support or defense of a person or a cause." As those who are the most knowledgeable about early care and education, we are perfectly suited to use our voices in support of young children and their families.

Advocacy can sometimes be overlooked as a fundamental aspect of our work. We may not be aware of the issues and policies that directly impact our field. For some, advocacy can seem complicated or intimidating. In this article, we will provide information on the key policy issues that face our field on a national level and describe ways you can be involved. Let's begin with a simple explanation of what advocacy is: the shift from awareness to action.

Awareness to Action

The Advocacy Strategy Framework (Coffman & Beer, 2015) is a tool for focusing advocacy efforts. The tool also provides a

continuum for advocacy, beginning with awareness, moving to will, and finally to action. Some of the strategies include building public awareness, writing a letter to the editor, contacting elected officials, and conducting voter outreach. In fact, the simple act of explaining why your work is important to someone outside of our field — your neighbor or the checker at the grocery store — is a form of advocacy. So you might already be doing this. There are several resources available that provide research and talking points for communicating about the importance of early childhood and supporting policies and funding for a strong ECE system. The messages are ready; all that is needed is to share them with as many people as you can!

Stay Informed

Maurice Sykes (2014) writes,

"Politics have a direct impact on our educational institutions; after all, it is government agencies that establish many of the rules and regulations that early childhood programs have to abide by. And the consequences of those rules and regulations are passed down to the children in our care."

Decisions for early care and education are made at the local, state, and federal



These authors are
 2015 Exchange Emerging Leaders
www.ChildCareExchange.com/leadership



Ana Page has been an advocate for children since 1999. She has worked at many levels of Early Childhood Education, both as a teacher and an administrator. She also is Executive Director of Orange County Peace

Camp, a non-profit dedicated to raising children into passionate leaders for peace and social justice. Her passion for effective child advocacy and policy drives her commitment to ensuring a better future for children everywhere.



Monica Brinkerhoff advocates both for young children and early childhood professionals and strongly believes in the power of the collective voice of our field. She has served in many capacities, including teacher, director, coach, and administrator. She is the Organization and Employee Development Director at Child-Parent Centers, Inc. in Tucson, Arizona.



Mary Beth Salomone Testa is a consultant with experience in team-building, advocacy and policy development with expertise in connecting policy and practice in child care and early education. Mary Beth has led advocacy campaigns across a variety of states and at the federal level, representing and building coalitions with child care providers, child care resource and referral agencies, home visiting programs, and the Children's Defense Fund.



Samantha Marshall is passionate about providing child care providers with the resources they need to provide quality care. She manages and writes for ChildCareInfo.com, a free information and community website for child care providers and has recently co-founded a nonprofit called T&L Foundation for Child Care Information which aims to strengthen quality child care through health and wellness initiatives. Samantha also sits on the Board of Directors for the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) as Member at Large.

levels. All of the details matter and they coalesce in early childhood programs across the country: Which families can enroll? How much will they pay? Which teachers are qualified and how much are they paid? What baseline standards are established and what is left out? What do quality standards look like and how are they measured?

It is important for us to remain informed about policy so that we can use our voices and expertise to influence decisions and work toward a well-funded, high-quality system of early childhood care, education, and development. One way to stay informed, to engage, to have your voice count, and to make a difference is to join and be active in your national association such as: National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Association for Family Child Care, the National Head Start Association, and the Early Care and Education Consortium, National Afterschool Association, Jewish Community Center Association, OMEP-USA, and National Coalition for Campus Child Care.

A National Conversation: ECE Making Headlines

Nationwide there are many conversations happening around early care and education. This is a crucial time for our field; the need for child care and high-quality early childhood education is real in every corner of our economy and country. The cost of care is a challenge for families and it makes headlines coast to coast; but quality costs program administrators, too. And wages for teachers and caregivers remain too low despite the investments of recent years. This national conversation must continue. There are many opportunities for teachers, program leaders, and all practitioners to be a part of the push for smart policies and meaningful investments.

Electoral Advocacy Campaigns

In this election year, organizations are taking the opportunity to elevate these issues to campaign platforms. At the time of writing this article, six presidential candidates have made statements about the cost of child care and vary widely in their proposed solutions.

NAEYC is leading an effort called Early Ed for President, which officially launched in February. Based on the premise that all young children deserve a chance to start school ready to reach their full potential, Early Ed for President is working to collectively build the political muscle to ensure that all candidates embrace early learning as a campaign 'must.' Early Ed for President is the beginning of this electoral advocacy effort that starts with the 2016 Presidential race. This non-partisan, 501(c)3 initiative is dedicated to: 1) elevating the conversation around early childhood education and educators; and 2) building skills and capacities to help early childhood educators become increasingly comfortable and effective in their electoral advocacy efforts. With a dual-track focus that encompasses a national social media campaign and targeted work in battleground states, Early Ed for President will keep advocates engaged and updated, mobilize social media networks to amplify early learning messages, and support state and local efforts to expand activities. Learn more at www.earlyedfor-president.org.

The Center for American Progress launched a campaign this year called "Within Reach." The goal of the Within Reach campaign is to put high-quality child care within reach for working families. Embedded in this campaign are a suite of policy proposals, including paid family leave and Universal PreK. There are several ways to be involved, from signing on to the campaign to sharing Within Reach graphics on social media. Visit their website for details: <http://withinreachcampaign.org/act>.

Ongoing Federal and State Advocacy

As we build support at campaign levels and in the media, we also have the regular, annual work of advocating in Congress, to the Administration, and at the state level for smart policies and investments.

Crucial to keep on our radar is the federal appropriations process and the strong message we need to deliver in the House and Senate about investments in the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and Head Start. By the time this article goes to print, the Appropriations Committee will likely be beginning their work. Every voice counts here. Look to your national associations and other organizations and partners, get the scoop, and be ready to take action.

In addition to the appropriations work for child care, we must be aware of the details of the implementation of the CCDBG law that was reauthorized in 2014. The United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a draft proposal for federal regulations for CCDBG, and comments were due in February. Advocates believe it is crucial to finalize the regulations so states have the details they need for implementation. Meanwhile, State Plans are being drafted and submitted. Everything is happening at the same time, and with too few dollars.

CCDBG also has 'mandatory funding.' In 2015 and again in 2016, the Administration's budget proposal called for significant investment on the mandatory side. This work doesn't happen through Appropriations committees; it happens in the Senate Finance and House Ways and Means Committee. And this year, legislation has also been introduced to 'give legs' to the ideas of that investment proposal. It's called the Child C.A.R.E. Act — Child Care Access to Resources for Early Learning. This is an ideal opportunity to talk about child care on Capitol Hill and the investment needed. The Child C.A.R.E.

Act, introduced by Senator Casey (D-PA) and Representatives Crowley (D-NY), and Frankel (D-FL), calls for big, new investments in CCDBG to:

- ensure that families with children under the age of four who are living at or below 200% of the federal poverty level can access high-quality child care through the subsidy program.
- guarantee that CCDBG provider payment rates are set at a level high enough to support quality child care and fairly compensate early childhood program providers for the work that they do.
- assist early childhood program providers on a pathway that invests in strengthening their skills, knowledge, and practice.

Advocates also anticipate the release of another round of applications for Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships. These present opportunities for infants, toddlers, their families, and their caregivers. The child care community is learning from the experiences of the first round of grants (awarded in 2014 and put into action in 2015) and we are enthusiastic about possibilities and successes in the second round.

Early childhood providers have a crucial role to play in this advocacy. The cost of child care makes headlines and a majority of the messaging pertaining to child care advocacy is about families. This is how it should be: young children and their families are why we are all in this field. The details of ideas and proposals matter to our family child care homes, center classrooms, and program operations nationwide. Making headlines is part of how we build public will. We have to get attention so that we can talk about the details and articulate the funding and policy needs of our field. Our community is hundreds of thousands strong, living the daily reality of why high-quality early care and education matters. These are challenging

times, with important opportunities, too. As leaders in this field, your voice matters in the national conversation.

The Cost of Care

Why is the cost of child care so high? It is critical to explore this question so that we fully understand the issue. We can then articulate the provider perspective in a way that helps advance smart policies and investments.

Child care remains one of the highest, if not the highest, expenses for families. According to Within Reach, child care costs more than median rent in all 50 states. Families are often left struggling with the difficult question of how to afford high-quality child care.

Research shows that high-quality teacher-child interactions and low teacher to child ratios are linked to improved child outcomes. Centers and programs need to hire more adults in order to maintain low ratios and ensure high quality, which results in higher labor and management costs. To meet these costs, programs are often faced with tough decisions such as:

- charging parents more (which is very difficult to do and still maintain enrollment).
- lowering (the already low) wages of employees.
- eliminating benefits and paid professional development for staff.

The cost of quality cannot fall on the backs of children, families, or early childhood staff. Many of us know from experience that teachers in the early childhood field are among the lowest paid workers in this country. Gould (2015) writes that, "The median hourly wage for child care workers in the U.S. is \$10.39, nearly 40% below the median hourly wage of workers in other occupations. Nearly 15% live below the poverty line, and a third have incomes that are below twice the poverty

line." Ensuring adequate funding for high-quality, accessible care and education is a complex issue. To solve it, we need help at the federal and state level, from communities, the business sector, and families.

Child care providers have the unique opportunity to facilitate conversations related to this issue. As the common ground for both teachers and families, centers and family child care homes can encourage staff and families to share their stories with policymakers. Sharing these stories helps state and federal governments become aware of the complex issue of the cost of child care.

Advocacy: It is Up to Us

Leaders are advocates. "The Crucibles of Leadership" in the *Harvard Business Review* explores what makes a leader successful, and concludes that: "The skills required to conquer adversity and emerge stronger and more committed than ever are the same ones that make for extraordinary leaders" (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). Despite the "Nos" and "I don't cares," leaders find a way to pivot and more passionately strive for what they believe in. These skills make a more powerful and effective advocate. Maurice Sykes (2014) continues with,

"...we as leaders have a serious responsibility to know which politicians and laws will harm or help our organizations and be involved in supporting political initiatives and candidates who will help us further our goals for children."

Take the opportunity to choose a person, to choose a cause, to understand the regulatory landscape and then advocate. Rise up and give life to the numbers. It's our responsibility.

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Sykes, M. (2014). *Doing the right thing for children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Resources

ACF blog on the federal budget proposal and the Child C.A.R.E. Act: www.acf.hhs.gov/blog/2016/02/presidents-2017-early-learning-budget

Child Care Aware of America summary of the FY17 federal budget proposal: www.usa.childcareaware.org/

Early Ed for President: www.earlyedforpresident.org/

NAFCC Roundup of FY2016 federal funding: www.nafcc.org/

NAFCC Summary of the FY17 federal budget proposal: www.nafcc.org

NHSA on the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships: www.nhsa.org/content/early-head-start-child-care-partnership-project

Within Reach: <http://withinreachcampaign.org>