

Turning Advocacy Into Action for Children

by Libby Doggett and Dale Epstein

In the March/April 2006 edition of *Exchange*, Pre-K Now described how the national movement to make voluntary pre-kindergarten available to every

child benefits all early learning providers who are willing to meet high quality standards.

With the addition this year of 120,000 children, thanks to 2005 budget increases, the United States will serve slightly over one million children in state-sponsored pre-k programs. States are working to improve program quality and expand the settings in which pre-k is provided. For example, of the one million children

served in state pre-k, about 30 percent are in non-school settings, and 29 of the 40 states providing pre-k allow services

to be offered in community-based settings.

To further advance pre-k for all during the upcoming January 2007 legislative sessions, more people who work with children every day must get involved.

So what can you do?

Stay informed

You have heard it said many times, "Information is power." To be an effective advocate for children, you need to become informed and then share your knowledge with community leaders, parents, and policymakers. Your voice as someone who has daily contact with children is needed to inform the local debate around education and care for young children. Organizations like the Center for Law and Social Policy, the National Women's Law Center, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the National

Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies are valuable resources in the fight to improve children's lives. And of course, sign up for information about pre-k from www.preknow.org. Getting online information from these organizations will give you access to valuable research, new trends in the field, and the latest developments in children's policy around the country.

Join a local coalition

Early care and education advocates must draw closer together and help our field realize that funding for any aspect of the early childhood agenda helps all children. If you haven't already done so, it is time to join a local or state children's advocacy organization. You need to know and work with people in your community who share your passion for making a difference in the lives of children in your community. Together you can reach out to other advocates and policy makers. It is easier

Pre-K Now will launch a weblog this fall to chronicle the daily hurdles faced by a public-school pre-k teacher and to share her classroom-level perspective on pre-k news. By reading and commenting on our blog, you can help parents, advocates, and early education professionals and students better understand the connections between high-quality pre-k and children's success in later years.

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to advocate as a part of a group, and it is more fun.

Be a resource for parents

As a trusted support for families, you are in a unique position to be a resource on practical parenting, quality care, and policy issues. The general early childhood movement needs to take a lesson from the advocates in the disability community and get parents more engaged and active. You can start by helping parents to recognize quality settings and to understand how young children learn through play and intentional teacher-led activities. You can also offer insights and opportunities to help them improve their parenting skills.

But don't stop there. Parents need to know when important bills are being considered and how they can impact state and local decisions. Help parents find reliable web sites for getting information that is easy to understand and act upon. One great resource is Parent's Action for Children at www.parentsaction.org. They are building a parent's movement to demand that our nation prioritize what matters most — our children. By joining with other parents, they hope to improve children's health and wellness as well as the quality of their education.

Be a resource for policymakers

Policymakers who have become early learning advocates tell us that it was a provider, a teacher, a researcher, a director, or a parent who taught them about the importance of the first five years of life. Many legislators say they became pre-k converts when they actually visited a pre-k center and saw first hand how much children were learning. It is time for more centers to invite local and state representatives and city and county officials to visit.

Don't be discouraged when your first and second invitations are not accepted. Persistence is the key to organizing a visit. It may take five or more invitations for elected leaders to realize you won't take no for an answer. Consider letting children make invitations to send to policymakers in your area. When you finally are successful, make sure you have parents present to talk about the benefits that high-quality pre-k is having for their children. Let policymakers see how much both parents and teachers are invested in young children's lives.

Make your views known

You are an early learning expert who is in touch with children and parents every day. Your voice needs to be heard. One effective strategy is to write letters to the editor of your local paper that express your opinion about the value and benefits of pre-k for the children in your center. Providers can also capitalize on national and statewide events related to pre-k by discussing them in letters to the editor which push for similar developments for children at the local level.

Get to know the education, metro, or social issues reporters in your community and let them know you are available to serve as a resource on issues pertaining to young children. Reporters are more likely to cover local developments in children's lives.

Unfortunately, young children don't command nearly the amount of media coverage they deserve, because typically there is no dedicated beat or prescribed reporter to cover early education. This must change, but change will only happen when teachers and providers, like you, become advocates and begin forming relationships with reporters at newspapers and radio and television stations.

Once you get the media's attention, local and state lawmakers will inevitably take notice. Much like news reporters, elected officials care foremost about local stories and the lives of the citizens in their community. Offering lawmakers the opportunity to visit your facilities will boost visibility both for your advocacy work and for the lawmaker's commitment to early care and education.

No time like the present

As an early learning professional with years of experience, you know what works for children in programs outside the home. You work every day to get children off to the right start in order to build successful communities and healthy children. By acting as a resource for parents and lawmakers, you can effect tangible change for the education and care of children in your area while strengthening the statewide and national movement for more and better services for our youngest citizens.

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