



THE EARLY ED WATCH BLOG

Spurring Innovative Policy in Minnesota

Christina Satkowski - June 8, 2009 - 12:00pm

Public-private partnerships are very common in early education, but what does the "private" half of these important relationships look like? Today and tomorrow, we take a look at Minnesota, a state where the private sector -- including businesses and non-profit foundations -- has assumed a prominent role in advocating for early education policy. Tomorrow we examine how the private sector can help shape what that policy might look like.



Of all the states where you might expect to find a robust early education system, Minnesota might be near the top of the list. After all, the North Star State is home to some of the country's most prominent early childhood researchers, including Arthur Reynolds at the University of Minnesota and Minneapolis Federal Reserve economists Art Rolnick and Bob Grunewald. And we can't forget that Minnesota is the site of the fictional, farcical and fabulous Lake Wobegon, where "all the children are above average."

Yet when it comes to government support for early education, Minnesota lags far behind other states. The state devotes just 1 percent of its total budget to early learning programs for children under 5 and their families. (The money funds programs such as kindergarten readiness screenings, parenting classes and Head Start.) According to the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#), Minnesota ranks 38th nationally in rankings of the number of children enrolled in publicly-financed preschool, just above the 12 states that offer no access at all. Next door, Wisconsin has included pre-k in its constitution since 1848, and Iowa -- which until recently looked a lot like Minnesota -- has made dramatic progress in expanding 4-year-old's access to pre-k.

Despite this void of support for high-quality early education -- and perhaps because of it -- several business coalitions and non-profit foundations have emerged as a driving force behind early childhood policy in the state.

Businesses getting involved

Several decades ago Minnesota was actually a leader in early ed. The [Early Childhood Family Education](#) program, founded in 1975, was one of the first state-run early childhood programs in the country to provide comprehensive services for children and their families. Since then, as new leaders have focused on other priorities and the state has faced recurrent budget shortfalls, Minnesota's political climate for supporting early childhood programs, especially publicly funded preschool, grew notably tepid, while other states surged ahead. In 2003, the legislature shocked advocates with deep cuts to early childhood programs totaling \$95.6 million.

But 2003 turned out to be a pivotal year in beginning to build public support for early education. In January, a newly-formed early childhood advocacy organization called [Ready 4 K](#) hired Chuck Slocum, a local business leader, and charged him with recruiting several prominent businesses to help lobby for more legislative support for early childhood programs, especially preschool. Most of these first business allies, such as the food giant [Cargill Corporation](#) and [Health Partners](#) had already shown an interest in early childhood education.

"[Slocum] found the right people, found people who got it and could bring the message to colleagues in business world who were still skeptical," said Kristen Norman-Major, a professor at Hamline University in St. Paul and a former early education staffer in state government.

That group of businesses, now called Minnesota Business for Early Learning (MnBEL), today counts several leading companies among its more than 300 members.

Later in 2003, in a series of separate conferences on early childhood, economists such as Rolnick and Grunewald presented their research on the economic benefits of preschool to the state's broader public for the first time. Business leaders seized on the research and helped redefine the case for greater investment in preschool from a moral one to an economic one that resonated well with CEOs and policymakers alike.

A Boost from Philanthropy

Meanwhile, non-profit foundations were starting to beat the drum for early education. The [Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative](#) (MECI), a \$10 million-dollar effort (over 7 years) funded predominantly by the [McKnight Foundation](#) and administered by six local "Initiative Foundations," is a network of 80 local coalitions that have identified, developed and implemented more than 400 small-scale child development programs in their communities. These programs range from organizing family fun nights to starting preschool programs. Many local funders credit the local commissions with raising awareness and political buzz about the need for early education, especially among residents of the state's rural communities.

"Legislators from all parts of the state are finding that any time they turn around, there is someone who wants to talk to them about early childhood and the need for increased investment to ensure that all young children have access to resources and opportunities," said Lynn Haglin, vice president of the [Northland Foundation](#) in Duluth, which is part of the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative.

Private sector policy leaders made a big leap forward in 2005 with the launch of the [Minnesota Education Learning Foundation](#) (MELF). Funded entirely by more than \$17 million from private donations, MELF has jumpstarted the policy discussion by creating a laboratory for early childhood policy ideas. The MELF pilot programs include a [scholarship program](#) for preschool (an idea developed by Rolnick and Grunewald), a [quality rating and improvement system](#) (QRIS), and 10 innovation grants to test smaller, but promising early childhood programs. The programs will culminate in 2011 with a report evaluating the

effectiveness of the programs to inform legislators as they develop early childhood policy.

That same year, a longtime Minnesota philanthropy called the Blandin Foundation launched [Invest Early](#), a comprehensive program for more than 300 children in rural Itasca County that includes 18 prekindergarten classrooms, family outreach and partnerships with area schools, Head Start, and teacher training programs at local colleges. Blandin is also conducting rigorous impact studies to help build the case for early childhood investments in the state.

Making Small but Steady Progress on Policy

Business- and philanthropy-led early childhood efforts have built public support for early education and raised the profile of the issue, forcing state lawmakers to take notice, said Todd Otis, president of Ready 4 K. "It's getting harder politically for them not to do right by it," he said. More than half the state's legislators are now members of the state's Early Learning Caucus, founded in 2002. Legislators heard from private-sector advocates during a [joint legislative hearing](#) on early childhood in January.

A handful of business coalitions and non-profits have produced policy plans that they hope will end up in law. For example, in 2006 the St. Paul-based think tank [Growth & Justice](#) convened 24 public and private sector stakeholders and asked them for ideas on how to best spend a hypothetical \$1 billion on PK-16 reform efforts. Their recommendation, published in a wide-ranging [report](#) after three years of meetings, was to direct more than 40 percent of the money towards children from birth to grade 3, including prenatal care and pre-kindergarten programs.

With the cloud of recession looming over the state budget, advocates have had to trim back their proposals. Ready 4 K has previously pushed for more than \$300 million in new investments in early childhood, but for now is promoting the [Quality Learning Act](#), a comprehensive \$161 million [plan](#) for developing an early education system that includes expanded eligibility for preschool and quality improvement grants for child care providers.

So far, the legislature has begun to make small but significant steps towards building an early childhood system. In 2007, the legislature approved [\\$750,000 in funding](#) for quality improvement grants for Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) child care providers, the first program of its kind in the nation. This session, the legislature is debating the [House Omnibus Early Childhood bill](#), which would establish an Office of Early Learning and direct stimulus funds to create a statewide version of the QRIS currently being tested by MELF.

Given the political momentum that is building for early education in Minnesota, advocates sense that the state may be poised to do much more. Will Minnesota create a comprehensive statewide preschool system similar to what is found in [Illinois](#) or Oklahoma? It's hard to say. Lawmakers in St. Paul are divided over whether to take MELF's scholarship idea statewide - many leaders like the way it allows for parent choice, but others are concerned about how it would work in the state's rural areas where there are few providers to choose from. In 2007 the legislature appropriated \$6 million for a larger, two-year pilot of the concept, called the Pre-Kindergarten Exploratory Projects.

Meanwhile, the private sector now faces a new set of questions: What role could it play if -- or more likely, when -- the state expands early childhood programs and establishes a more sustainable publicly funded system? Have these early childhood advocates effectively begun to work themselves out of a job? Will there still be room for the innovation and on-the-ground community involvement that often comes with the private sector's work? [Check back tomorrow](#) as we explore how the private sector can still play a big role in early education, even after the state becomes more involved.

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